A.T.S. on the march (1940). [*British Official Photo.*

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BRITAIN'S OTHER ARMY

The Story of the A.T.S

by

EILEEN BIGLAND

LONDON

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To the officers and other ranks of
the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

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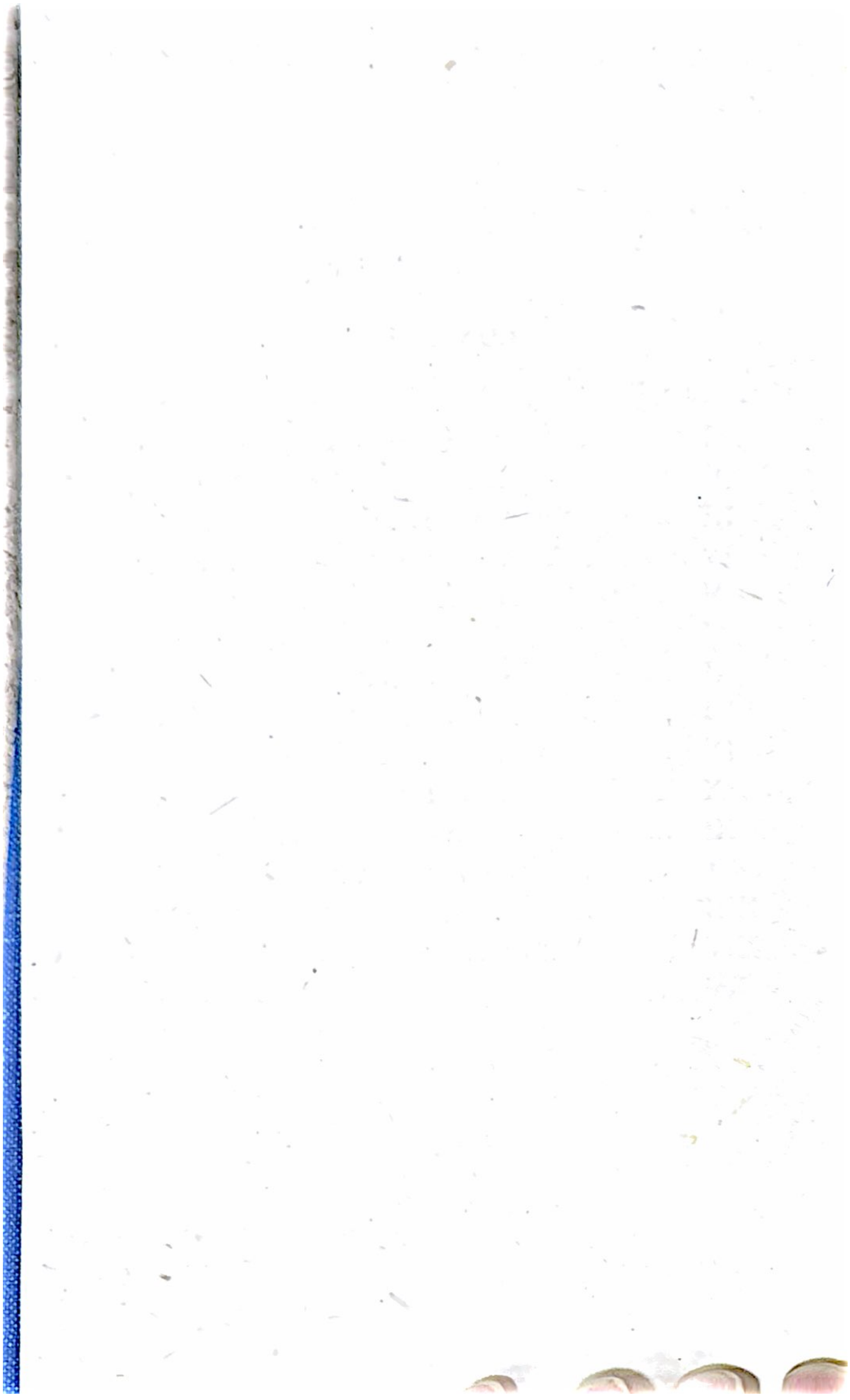

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BRITAIN'S OTHER ARMY

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF A SERVICE

I

ON September 9th, 1938, the Auxiliary Territorial Service, under the leadership of Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, G.B.E., L.L.D., D.Sc., came into being by Royal Warrant, and on September 27th this fact was publicly announced.

The announcement (as was proved a bare year later) fired large numbers of young women to volunteer for training so that they might be of service to their country in the event of war; but it is doubtful if the British public as a whole paid much attention to it. Everyone was suffering from that state of nervous tension known as "Munich jitters." Radio and newspapers poured out a spate of news—vital, terrifying, breath-taking news, and nobody had time to give much heed to what a pack of girls were doing. All their energies were concentrated upon wondering what Adolf Hitler was *going* to do.

I confess I shared in this intense preoccupation. It was not until two months later, when a couple of women with shopping-bags squeezed into the already crowded compartment of a London-bound train, that I remembered the existence of the baby A.T.S.

"My," said the first, "you'll never guess what our Betty's done now!"

"What?" asked the second.

"Gone and joined up with that Auxiliary whatever-it-is. Came home yesterday as pleased as Punch. 'Hi, Mum,' she says, 'I've joined the Army!' 'Army?' I says, 'whatever rubbish are you talking now?' 'It's true,'

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she says, "and then she shoves a lot of papers under my nose. I tell you, you could have knocked me down with a feather!"

Her friend made sympathetic noises. "There now, don't you go upsetting yourself. It'll turn out to be just one of those Youth Clubs they talk about. Whoever heard of such a thing? Women joining the *Army*!"

"That's what Dad said when I told him first, and he was four years in the trenches in the last lot, so he ought to know. But when he read those papers he carried on alarming—there it was in black and white, parades and camps and goodness knows what, and a long bit about how they'd put themselves under military law if they had to go on active service."

The compartment rustled into life. Someone said that the Girl Guides were carrying a joke a bit too far altogether; another suggested the whole trouble had started when women were given the vote; a third remarked anyone might think we were living in Russia, and a fourth that camp life would be a blessing if it removed some of the paint and lipstick with which the young women smeared their faces.

It was left to an old gentleman in the corner to prick the bubble of argument. "Stuff and nonsense," he said. "*Everyone* knows there isn't going to *be* a war!"

The compartment subsided and a faint breath of relief fanned across it.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Betty's-mother's-friend. "Worrying about nothing. That's you all over!"

"M'm, I daresay I was a bit stupid. To tell the truth I was that taken aback I forgot Mr. Chamberlain had been to see that Hitler and settled everything so nicely. And our Dad took on so, not about the war, you know, but this camping idea. Our Betty's always been one for chills, and sleeping in a tent will do her no good, and then. . . ."

She and her friend began a muttered conversation in which the words "wet feet," "infection," "delicate stomach" kept recurring, while the rest of the compart-

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ment crackled newspapers and I stared miserably out of the window.

I had wandered too long in Europe and elsewhere to share their easy optimism about peace in our time and my sympathies were all with the unknown Betty. She and her kind had shown a certain courage—even in 1938 it wasn't so simple to fly in the faces of Mum and Dad and the ribald comments of friends. Maybe they had been caught up by the glamour of adventure and had no notion of why they were doing this thing, or what the phrase "active service" implied, or how they would tackle it when they met it; but somehow their spirit seemed supremely right. Other people were either full of complacency regarding averted danger or full of gloomy forebodings: these children were bent on preparing for any eventuality.

Their efforts might not be successful. Having witnessed rehearsal of the present war I had no illusions about hopeful bands of volunteers; indeed, I couldn't imagine how any such, particularly of my own sex, could hope to avert, or even mitigate, the appalling horrors of modern warfare. If I could have seen forward to 1945 I might have altered my view; but the future was a black cavern into which I dared not look and I reverted to my dismal thinking until the train drew into Waterloo and a little man next me groped in the rack for his hat.

"Funny," all this outcry about women in the Army," he said. "Why, soldiers' wives served in the Peninsular War."

"That's a far cry?"

"Yes, yes." (I still remember his little deprecating cough.) "But it was a beginning, you know, a beginning."

II

As I write this book about the Auxiliary Territorial Service I recall his words and realise how true they were,

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because if one wishes to study the history and tradition behind the khaki-clad girls of today one has to go right back to the year 1808, when the British determined to free Spain and Portugal from Napoleon's dominion.

During that long and bitter campaign the men serving under the Duke of Wellington were accompanied, in many cases, by their wives, these women being "on the married strength" of the various regiments. In no sense of the word were these women camp-followers (perhaps that fact requires stressing) and their jobs were varied and arduous. Besides the more ordinary tasks of cooking, washing and mending for their menfolk they often undertook nursing duties, despite their ignorance of medical matters, in conditions which must have been deplorable; and they also sought for and allotted billets as the troops moved from place to place.

They were the pioneers of their sex so far as service with the Army was concerned. Sick and fevered in the summer heat, cold and wet in the winter snow, fatigued and ill-clothed and debilitated by an existence which tried the strongest of the soldiers, they trekked gamely back and forth across the Peninsula for six weary years. They got no medals, no praise; indeed, it is doubtful whether anybody outside their immediate families understood what they had gone through. A few died from hardship and the remainder returned, many as widows, tattered and forlorn, to England and obscurity. They never knew, that regiment of women, that they had laid a foundation stone on which successive generations were to build.

But in the early 1830's a young English girl asked eager questions about their work—especially about their nursing activities. Her name was Florence Nightingale and she was, in that day and age, far removed from the wives of serving soldiers, for her father was a landed proprietor and she was expected to conform to the strict rules governing young ladies of her upbringing. She might take the vapours if she would, but she must not hanker after knowledge of human suffering. She might sail gloriously through a London Season to become the decorous bride

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of a respected baronet, but she must not strive to find out how the other half of the world lived.

One can imagine with what misgivings the friends of Florence Nightingale viewed her early likes and dislikes ! A girl-child who preferred bandaging the paw of a shepherd's dog to dancing was simply incomprehensible, while a débutante who forsook the London Season in order to haunt hospitals and reformatories was really a being beyond the pale.

Fortunately for humanity, her parents were strangely sensible and gave their odd daughter a free rein. Avidly she dug up details of the medical service with the Army in the Peninsular War and studied conditions in many hospitals and institutions both here and abroad. What she learnt of England's backwardness in nursing and sanitation revolted her so much that she went as a student first to the Institute of Protestant Deaconesses at Kaiserswerth and then to Paris, where the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul taught her a great deal concerning hospital management.

She used both knowledge and money freely in the reorganising of an extremely badly run Sanatorium for Governesses, but far from being satisfied her restless ardent spirit longed for the chance to do more and in 1854 came the report on the needless and horrible sufferings of British sick and wounded in the Crimea.

As Florence Nightingale herself said, this was " the trumpet-call of duty." Immediately she wrote to Sidney Herbert, then Secretary of War, offering her services. Most curiously (considering the date) this letter crossed one of his containing a request that she proceed to the Crimea, and on October 24th, with a staff of thirty-seven nurses, she set sail on her great mission. Through it she not only prepared the way for the inauguration of a recognised Military Nursing Service but also gained material for her book *Notes on Nursing* which revolutionised nursing methods in this country.

The foundations of a service of women helping the Army in time of war were now well and truly laid, but for

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a long time there was little further progress or expansion. Following the South African War in 1902 Florence Nightingale's Nursing Service was reorganised under the title of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, and in 1909 the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (F.A.N.Y.) came into being, a corps whose shoulder flashes are still familiar to us but whose work has so vastly changed with the growing mechanisation of modern warfare that it is almost startling to recall that only thirty-six years ago they were "horsewomen who undertook to ride on to the battlefield and carry the wounded back to medical help!"

Tending the sick and wounded remained the only form of service with the Army open to women until the declaration of war against Germany in 1914. Then a new corps called the Women's Volunteer Reserve was formed, and it came in for a deal of criticism from the ignorant since its members wore khaki and indulged in rather a lot of drilling. Perhaps they were a little over-anxious to impress their self-imposed military status on the public mind, but it seems a pity that the critics who accused them of "play-acting at soldiering" and "forgetting the dignity of womanhood" could not have seen them at work, for this consisted of a variety of drab and menial tasks which, incidentally, had been performed by women in private life for centuries without any criticism from anybody.

The Women's Volunteer Reserve "ran" innumerable canteens. That is to say, they scrubbed endless floors, tables and benches, washed up endless piles of greasy dishes, cooked and served endless meals to the accompaniment of "fish and chips four times—and make it slippy, miss." They were a purely voluntary organisation and most of them did their jobs in time spared from their paid work or home duties, often going straight from a canteen night-shift to their offices. Like their sisters of a hundred years earlier they got no medals and no pay; but it is pleasant to record the social advance of Mr. Thomas Atkins during that period, for gradually these

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women of 1914 became the recipients of a somewhat grudging meed of praise from him—perhaps because they were not "on the married strength."

By 1915 there was an acute shortage of trained cooks in the Army and with all the goodwill in the world the Women's Volunteer Reserve could not cope with the requests for cooks which poured in, so it was decided to form the Women's Legion. This was not, as is sometimes thought, a military organisation. It was a purely private society which any cooks and waitresses might join, and from it they were hired by the War Department. It held, however, very great significance. Through it, for the first time, the Army were *paying* for female labour other than that of the nursing profession.

And very soon the Army wanted more women . . . and more women. All through the dark year of 1916 the seriousness of the man-power situation grew and in the December the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in France agreed to accept women for duty in back areas. With a celerity which would have been impossible a brief two years before the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (W.A.A.C.) was established. Mrs. Chalmers Watson, C.B.E., M.D., sister to Auckland and Eric Geddes, was its senior officer, and Mrs. Gwynne-Vaughan its Chief Controller Overseas.

It had been proved that some 12,000 soldiers engaged in non-combatant duties connected with the lines of communication in France could be replaced by women, and on March 31st, 1917, the first draft of W.A.A.C.'s arrived to take over these duties. They were so successful that they were quickly followed by other contingents, and by the early summer of 1918, when the corps was renamed Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, 10,000 women were serving in this Western theatre of war, while before demobilisation took place no fewer than 57,000 had passed through the ranks. They were of all types, all classes. They worked in amity, proving Kipling's contention that "*the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under their skins*"—and behind them stretched the

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long procession of women who had laboured that their successors might have the right to serve with the Army.

III

Nineteen hundred and nineteen was a year in which women were praised and rewarded for their work under active service conditions ; 1934 presented a very different picture. War was a thoroughly unpopular topic. People shuddered at the bare mention of the word and told each other fiercely that the European barometer was at set fair, so the group of women who announced a proposal to organise a new Women's Legion which would be available for duty under the direction of the War Office or other Government Departments were regarded with a considerable amount of distaste. Old gentlemen in clubs shook their heads and talked of "war-mongers." Left (and other) Wing intellectuals spoke loftily of "exhibitionists" and "Imperialistic Die-Hards." The average man in the street vaguely remembered the Bright Young Things of the 1920's and said you never knew what "high society women" would be up to next. Then the excitement died as excitements do and people said that women were always silly creatures, and thought about something else.

Quietly and without undue fuss, the council of the new Women's Legion went on with their plans. It operated under the leadership of Lady Londonderry and had Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughan as Chairman, and its first activity was to enrol members for training in anti-gas precautions. One might have thought that the public's contemptuous indifference to the scheme would have killed it at birth, but this was far from being the case and by 1936 the Women's Legion, a small yet thriving child, was submitting plans for an Officers' Training Section to the War Office and the Air Ministry, together with requests for advice and support.

Both were granted and Authority was extremely helpful.

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Courses of lectures for potential officers were arranged and a large summer camp was held at Hemel Hempstead—much to the alarm of some of its inhabitants, while parents whose daughters indulged in this unusual form of summer holiday explained defensively that so-and-so had always liked an open-air life and anyway it wasn't doing her any harm.

As a baby outgrows its clothes so the new Women's Legion outgrew its planned limitations, and at a meeting of the Officers' Training Section it was decided to close the existing organisation and to carry on a more ambitious and extensive programme under the name of the Emergency Service, which received recognition from both the Army Council and the Air Council, as *a voluntary organisation, the purpose of which is to train women as officers for any women's corps that may be employed on duties other than nursing in a national emergency.*

The rechristened child throve so well and began to grow so sturdy that in 1937 discussions took place as to its future, and it was decided tentatively to expand the Service right away so that training of N.C.O.'s and other ranks might be undertaken, while more discussions were arranged to work out the lines on which a far bigger Women's corps—already hinted at in the official recognition—might be organised.

Then came the Munich crisis and the Royal Warrant of September 9th. The baby of many names who had struggled so tenaciously against a variety of difficulties was now a definite and official being—the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

IV

Thanks to the foresight of the Women's Legion the new Service had a nucleus of trained officers to draw upon, but the number of volunteers was so large and consequent

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development so swift that the leaders had to use all their experience and skill to cope with the situation by the spring of 1939. Companies were formed in each county under the direction of County Commandants and while these were hard at work training, officers up and down the country were attending courses, with the result that over a thousand of them had received instruction before the outbreak of war. Camps were organised so that the A.T.S. might become accustomed to military procedure and atmosphere and, more important still, learn how officers and other ranks could work together smoothly and efficiently. Just to make things a shade more difficult when everybody was striving to compress three months' work into a week and the majority of the volunteers could only give their spare time or holidays to the job, these camps were deluged by the worst downpours of rain known in England for many summers and Auxiliaries who had held bright visions of a little brisk P.T. under a benign sun found themselves slithering through the mud to leaky tents which dripped under a leaden sky.

They took discomfort gallantly, those thousands of girls who had, like "our Betty," offered their services to their country. As one of them said to me long afterwards, "It was simply everything we thought it wouldn't be. We hated the first three days, then we settled down and when we broke camp we wept salt tears at the thought of going home. We'd got tough, you see—Gosh, by the second week I was eating like a horse, and then—oh, I can't explain but you sort of got down to essentials in camp and forgot to worry about trifles."

She had something there. For myself I think that early month in camp gave her the moral stiffening necessary to carry her through the far more strenuous times she has known since.

Taken all round, the A.T.S. had a feverish first year. There was a constant stream of recruits to deal with; there was any amount of vital training to be got through; until the summer of 1939 there was the R.A.F. to serve as well as the Army . . . and all the time the Auxiliary

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organisers had to plan for expansion and more expansion.

They planned well. When crisis came again and the Auxiliaries were called to "action stations" they were ready, trained and quietly eager, and it is a matter of just pride to the A.T.S. that on September 3rd, Britain's declaration of war was transmitted by a woman operator.

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CHAPTER II

THE TESTING TIME

I

ON the eve of the outbreak of war 17,000 Auxiliaries had enrolled, pledging themselves to serve their country in whatever capacity and at whatever place the authorities desired. Their number was significant; but for my part I feel that the most important part of their voluntary action is one which the majority of the public do not realise even now. These early volunteers "signed on for the duration" *without having the foggiest idea of their possible rates of pay*, as these were not fixed until general mobilisation took place.

The Auxiliaries of 1939 had had a sense of high adventure to help carry them through initial difficulties and problems, and when they swung from part-time training in peace to whole-time service in war they were keyed up to the highest possible pitch.

"Ah," they said, "here it is! This is why we drilled and cooked, checked stores and scrubbed, learnt about signals and Army records, tinkered with lorries and motor-cycles. Fine—we're ready for anything! Air-raids, gas-attacks, invasion!"

And nothing happened.

When people have worked at fever-heat for a specific purpose and that purpose fails to materialise they are apt to suffer a rather grim reaction. It says a very great

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deal for the A.T.S. that they kept both pluck and enthusiasm during the weary months of the "phoney" war. They went on with the various jobs allotted to them without any sign of boredom and as autumn deepened into an exceptionally hard winter they tussled with a series of discomforts which made the previous summer's camping interlude appear positively roseate.

They developed an uncanny knowledge of Nissen huts and their vagaries. Roofs which let in the rain, stoves which either refused to burn or successfully kippered the hut's inhabitants, ill-fitting doors and floor-boards which encouraged all the winds of heaven, bunks which were concave or convex but never flat, ablution blocks where the hot water taps ran icy cold or froze up altogether.

"And yet we didn't mind awfully," said one after recounting her story of that winter. "We were all in the same boat, which made it fun; and then it was a new experience none of us had had before. I mean, we're awfully poor at home, but we'd always been *warm* anyway. And I'll be ever so useful in the house when this lot's over! I can lag pipes and thaw frozen ones with a blowlamp; I can make any stove in creation burn; I know exactly how to sling a tarpaulin under a leaky roof or stuff wads of paper between draughty floor-boards. Oh, and I can eat anything at any time."

Besides this valuable knowledge the first months of war taught her and her companions something even more important—understanding of human nature. In one hut or dormitory there might be twenty or thirty girls with entirely different backgrounds and violently different views on food, health, love and life in general all thrown together in close propinquity. Under such conditions petty snobbishnesses and antagonisms quickly disappeared. The girl from the English Public School discovered that the girl who had started work in a factory at fourteen was a generous creature of sensitive mind; the factory girl found that the Public School one hadn't an atom of "swank" about her. The mannequin made friends with the university graduate; the housewife dis-

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cussed the price of stockings with the shop assistant; the secretary got tips on make-up from the beauty specialist.

"The odd thing was," said one, "how frank we became with each other. In civvy street you'd hesitate to tell another girl that her little habits—like tapping her teeth with a pencil or fiddling with her hair—drive you frantic. In the A.T.S. you just tell her plunk out. It goes deeper than that too. Everybody trots out their private worries, something to do with home life, or money, or love affairs—even skeletons in cupboards; and we all give whatever advice we can think up."

"Being with the men so much has done us an awful lot of good," said another thoughtfully. "Most of us had husbands or fiancés or brothers, I know, but we hadn't had to work side by side with them on the same job. In the Army you develop a kind of feeling of comradeship with men that it's very difficult to get in peace-time, and you learn that they think straighter than women do."

So the A.T.S., through their contact with each other and with the Army, grew to appreciate the strange brotherhood of war and to learn many things—almost all of them good. Naturally, of course, they also picked up the soldier's age-old habit of grousing and a certain number of his choice expletives, but far from doing them harm these provided a much needed outlet for frayed tempers when things went wrong and lessened the monotony of work, and it *was* monotonous in those days for at the outbreak of war only five kinds of employment were open to Service women: cooking, clerking, orderly work, storekeeping and driving.

From the military viewpoint, of course, the "phoney" war period was an immense help. It enabled the A.T.S. girls to become thoroughly conversant with their different jobs, with Army methods and with the totally new way of life into which they had been pitchforked on mobilisation. It also gave that grand but conservative being, the British soldier, time to get over his initial resentment at

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having a "lot of girls fussing round" and to discover that they were in reality extremely useful working companions.

Meantime volunteers kept pouring in so fast that the Recruiting Officers and N.C.O.'s had what is known as a "jammy job," while the Authorities were sometimes hard pressed to arrange preliminary training for all who wanted to join. There was plenty of work for everybody; the difficulty was to find enough people to prepare them for it.

Soon after the war broke out Her Majesty the Queen had honoured the Auxiliaries by becoming their Commandant-in-Chief, and in February, 1940, H.R.H. the Princess Royal, who had previously accepted the rank of Controller in Yorkshire, was formally enrolled as Chief Controller, signing the same undertaking as did all other members of the Corps. In August, 1941, H.R.H. was gazetted Controller Commandant. These Royal recognitions were justly deserved and the A.T.S. were exceedingly proud of them. On parade they stepped out more briskly; at work they bent over their tasks with added vim. Now, they seemed to say, we are what we set out to be—a real Women's Army.

But at the back of their minds there was always one question. When will action come?

II

Action came suddenly, swiftly, at the tail end of a winter so miserable that it seemed as if nature herself was sulking in protest against the madness of man. Contingents of the A.T.S. were to be posted to France. In camps and billets innumerable Auxiliaries besieged their friends for the loan of "Soldier's Friend" powder and polished buttons with zest, singing the while about rolling barrels, and washing which would hang on the Siegfried Line. (They had sung at every available moment since they first enrolled, but now their voices held an added fervour.)

The units that were posted to the B.E.F. left England

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in the belief they would not return to it, except on leave, until the war was won. They had scarcely settled down and become versed in their new jobs before the Germans began their prelude to the great break-through, the invasion of the Low Countries. As the news worsened and anxiety increased, these Auxiliaries—who less than a year ago had been beauty specialists, business women, housewives, typists, university students, mannequins and goodness knows what else—showed their worth and steadiness. In a very short time they had journeyed far from the humdrum ordered life of the 8.15 every morning and a bath bun and a coffee for lunch; yet they faced up to the problems of danger and evacuation as coolly as though they had missed the 'bus home from a picnic.

There were many instances of individual courage; there were more, if less spectacular instances of sound team-work and the following two are typical examples.

As the Germans pushed forward in France a group of A.T.S. drivers were working desperately hard evacuating wounded from the forward zones to Paris. Driving along a main road they turned a corner—and ran straight into an enemy convoy!

"We thought we were for it and would be sent back towards Germany under guard," one told me, "but that convoy was in far too much of a hurry to bother with such a move. They made us turn our ambulances round; then they sandwiched them separately between strings of German vehicles so that we hadn't a hope of communicating with our fellow drivers. The officers were most correct and punctilious but they watched us as cats watch mice and there didn't seem the slightest chance of eluding them.

"We went all haughty, of course, very disdainful with our noses in the air. We refused to answer any questions and when one or two of the German soldiers tried a bit of fraternising we simply didn't answer. Some of our wounded were badly hurt and needed a lot of attention each time the convoy stopped—which wasn't nearly often

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enough. I must say that when we asked for food and so forth for them we got it, but it was maddening not to be able to speak to each other or try to think up some wild plan of escape.

"For three whole days we toddled along with that convoy. During the night stops I had desperate ideas of getting away, but the guards were much too vigilant and anyway I couldn't have manhandled the stretchers without help. But on the fourth morning for some reason they changed the order of convoy and stuck all our ambulances up at the front behind one leading German truck. We tootled off and pretty soon the vehicle behind our last ambulance slackened speed—maybe it had engine trouble or something. Our driver passed the word forward—you should have heard us all yelling to each other above the noise of our engines!—and as I was driving the first ambulance I decided I'd take a chance. It was a slim one, heaven knows, but anything was better than grinding forward with the Germans.

"We knew the country pretty well through driving over it continuously during the past month or two, and there was a short cut I remembered, a little lane that cut off the main road just short of a sharp bend and rejoined it later on. The trouble was, could I remember *which* lane? I passed word back for the others to follow me whatever I did, crossed my fingers as we approached what looked to be the right bend, waited until the truck ahead had disappeared round it and then shot up a lane to my left.

"The others followed me all right, but we had to step on it if we were to beat the main convoy and the surface was simply ghastly. I hate to think what the poor wounded lads suffered as we bumped and bucketed along that lane, but they agreed afterwards it was worth it for we regained the main road well ahead of the Germans and beat it for Paris. When we got there we parked the boys—they were all safely evacuated afterwards—and set off on our own trek to the coast. We made it all

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right.''

''And you're still driving ?''

''Oh, rather!'' She rubbed her nose reflectively. ''It's a bit tame nowadays.''

The second example comes from the A.T.S. telephonists who were stationed in Paris before that city fell to the enemy. They were all bilingual and working in an Army exchange which could not be done without until the last possible minute ; they were living in a city of rumours ; they knew from the calls they put through or received exactly how bad things were, but they carried on with their job and even pleaded to be allowed to stop when the order came through for their immediate evacuation. As it was they got away by the skin of their teeth. As they piled into a waiting lorry and drove off towards the coast the Germans were marching through the suburbs on the far side of Paris.

''What did you feel like ?'' I asked one of them.

''An awful mess,'' she answered candidly. ''I hadn't had a decent wash for days and my hair was like a bird's nest. Our driver was mad because I wanted to go back for my face-cream. Oh, well, maybe I'll see Paris again one of these fine days.''

''You want to go back ?''

She grinned. ''Rather ! You never know, I might find my face-cream.''

III

The great majority of the A.T.S. were still in this country, and following the tragic evacuation from Dunkirk they did a job which will remain as one of the finest in the annals of their Service ; they fed and re-equipped the Army which returned from the shores of France. No matter what their rank or their particular category they turned to with a will and attended to the men's immediate necessities. There is a story on record

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at the War Office of an A.T.S. officer faced with the problem of welcoming and feeding 8,000 soldiers. She was in the depths of the country and her resources were nil, but she promptly requisitioned a bath, a sheep and a field of cabbages, sent her sergeants chasing around to organise local help, and got down to business. An enormous wood fire was lit in the open and while it was kindling the sheep was skinned, cleaned and jointed. Then the bath was slung, the biggest soup-caldron ever, on poles above the fire and into it went water, sheep, cabbages and seasoning. The 8,000 men were fed.

All over England officers and other ranks of the A.T.S. cooked and washed up, cooked again and washed up again, went on with these two jobs until they were dropping with fatigue—but the soldiers had their much needed meals. In clothing and equipment depots up and down the country clerks and storewomen worked night and day issuing and checking new uniforms, new gear, new gas-masks, new everything. Ambulance drivers drove tirelessly, some of them making incredible journeys, and in the Army garages girls who were grease up to the eyebrows kept vehicles in running repair.

That summer the A.T.S. attained a new dignity. It had passed through the teething troubles of babyhood, the growing pains of childhood. It was a strong-growing adolescent, eager for maturity.

IV

Now expansion began in earnest. As the man-power situation became more acute so the A.T.S. took over more and more duties to release men for active service and from the five categories of employment open at the outbreak of war grew over a hundred. For the first time in Army history women became (to quote at random from the long official list) carpenters and joiners, coach trimmers, draughtswomen (architectural, mechanical, railway or

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port construction, and topographical), electricians, instrument mechanics, camouflage modellers, kine-theodolite operators, plotters, radiographers, sheet metal workers, tinsmiths and whitesmiths, vulcanisers and welders.

If there were misgivings in some quarters as to whether women were really capable of undertaking such tasks these quickly disappeared, and in April, 1941, the A.T.S. received the greatest recognition the Service could have asked—it was given equal military status with men. This meant that the A.T.S. came under the Army Act, enjoying the privileges and responsibilities of the Armed Forces of the Crown, and that its officers held the King's Commission.

Shortly afterwards the first contingent of A.T.S. to leave England since the evacuation of the B.E.F. went to Washington and in December of the same year Auxiliaries were drafted to the Middle East, forerunners of the many thousands of women who were to be serving in different theatres of war three years later ; but the most significant happening of 1941 was the posting of Auxiliaries to ack-ack gun and searchlight batteries where they won a fame deserving of immortality.

The public had grown used to seeing girls in khaki. Indeed slowly, and in some cases reluctantly, they had developed an admiration for "the way they stuck their job," but when the announcement was made early in 1942 that owing to the spread of the war and the urgent need for more organised and economical use of woman-power there would in future be conscription for the A.T.S., people were shaken to the core.

Conscription for *women* ! The thing was unheard of, impossible, revolting ! All the old gags about the dignity of womanhood, and the terrors which might result from delicately nurtured girls consorting with the "brutal and licentious soldiery" were trotted forth once more. People wrote indignant letters to their M.P.'s, and others wrote equally indignant letters to the Press, and would-be experts calculated that home life was gone for good and that feminine dictatorship was imminent.

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The storm died, and it is hard to know what it was all about. The Ministry of Labour was already "directing" women into industry: why not "direct" them into the Army? The war was going badly, the Army's need was great, and the A.T.S. had already more than proved their worth. Most significant of all, the girls concerned weren't fussing in the slightest—they realised they had to do something to help and they might as well do so in the A.T.S. as in a factory.

The Army handled the situation superbly. It went on with its plans quietly and systematically, and on a visit to a large A.T.S. training establishment I found it impossible to tell the difference between a conscript and a volunteer. Wisely the word "conscript" was never used. When a fresh draft arrived at the depot nobody except the examining officers read the heading "Army Class" on a girl's papers. She was received in the same manner as any volunteer, had the same accommodation and privileges, was given the same training and ultimately posted to a unit in the same way. Any idea of difference simply did not exist, and she was allowed to choose the category for which she was most fitted.

The result justified the means. With a steady increase of A.T.S. personnel thousands of men were released for fighting service.

By the Autumn of 1943, when Chief Controller J. M. Knox, C.B.E., resigned the Directorship of the A.T.S., because of ill-health, and Chief Controller L. V. L. E. Whateley, C.B.E., was appointed as her successor, the Service had 212,000 members . . . a number equivalent to that of a large standing army in peace-time! For details of their distribution one cannot do better than quote the following extract from the Director's address to a Press Conference in December, 1943.

"In the United Kingdom there are more than 200,000 Auxiliaries and more than 6,000 officers. Nearly a third of the women serving in this country are trades-women—that is to say, they have qualified in a skilled

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trade and are directly replacing or supplementing soldier craftsmen. In all there are 80 trades—14 of which are "Group A" trades calling for the highest qualifications —such trades as armourers, draughtswomen, fitters and wireless operators fall into this category. There are no fewer than 15 different types of clerk and there are in all more than 30,000 women engaged on clerical duties— replacing men of the Royal Army Pay Corps, Royal Army Ordnance Corps and maintaining records of soldiers in the various Record Offices. There are also 9,000 technical storewomen who do vital work in Ordnance Depots—more than 3,000 Teleprinter Operators and 4,000 Switchboard Operators assisting the Royal Corps of Signals in manning the vital lines of communication throughout the country and keeping in touch with theatres of war overseas. These are dependent for their existence on the gallant army of 4,000 cooks, of whom 2,000 are tradeswomen cooks, and 2,000 assistant cooks who help to feed the men and women serving in this country."

Apart from these specialised tradeswomen mentioned in the Director's speech there were, on the date she gave it, nearly 120,000 non-tradeswomen in the Service, 15,000 of them were drivers, 30,000 were doing essential work as batwomen and orderlies of various kinds, and the remainder were distributed in over thirty kinds of non-technical employment.

Today the Service has grown still bigger—and is again calling for volunteers. Practically each week drafts of A.T.S. personnel are sent overseas—to France or Belgium, to the Middle East, to North Africa or to Italy, sometimes to even further afield, for there are Auxiliaries stationed in the United States, in the Caribbean and in East Africa, while parties of A.T.S. officers are temporarily attached for instruction purposes to the C.W.A.C. in Canada and the W.A.C.I. in India.

From Hell-Fire Corner to the Caribbean, from Washington to Delhi . . not a bad record for a Service less than seven years old !

I shall always be glad it has been my privilege to watch

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the A.T.S. develop, to see its members at work and talk to them in their leisure moments, to learn of their general and especial problems, finally to write a book about this Women's Army.

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CHAPTER III

"We Send Them The Armour"

I

The great Ordnance Depot was a world on its own. All along the valley stretched the rows of neatly camouflaged sheds and huts; on the slope behind were more huts—a veritable town of them, where the men of the R.A.O.C. lived, and on the hill top lay a similar town which housed the A.T.S. These three divisions were linked by a network of concrete roadways, each bearing directions and numbers on trim white placards, and on every available space between hutments people had very evidently been digging for victory.

"Entirely self-contained *and* all our own vegetables," said the A.T.S. officer who met me at the gates. "There's the men's Y.M.C.A. canteen and reading room, we have a Y.W. of our own up the hill. We also have a N.A.A.F.I. where we can buy most things from cigarettes to hairclips, and on the way to the mess I must show you our gym. It's our pride and joy. Oh, excuse me!" she paused and hailed a passing Auxiliary, "My appointment is 1400 hours tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Our chiropodist," she explained as we went on up the slope.

"You seem to have all the comforts of a home?"

"Rather! I'll show you the hairdressers' establishment—better than Bond Street. But the girls here have

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"We send them the armour." [*British Official Photo.*

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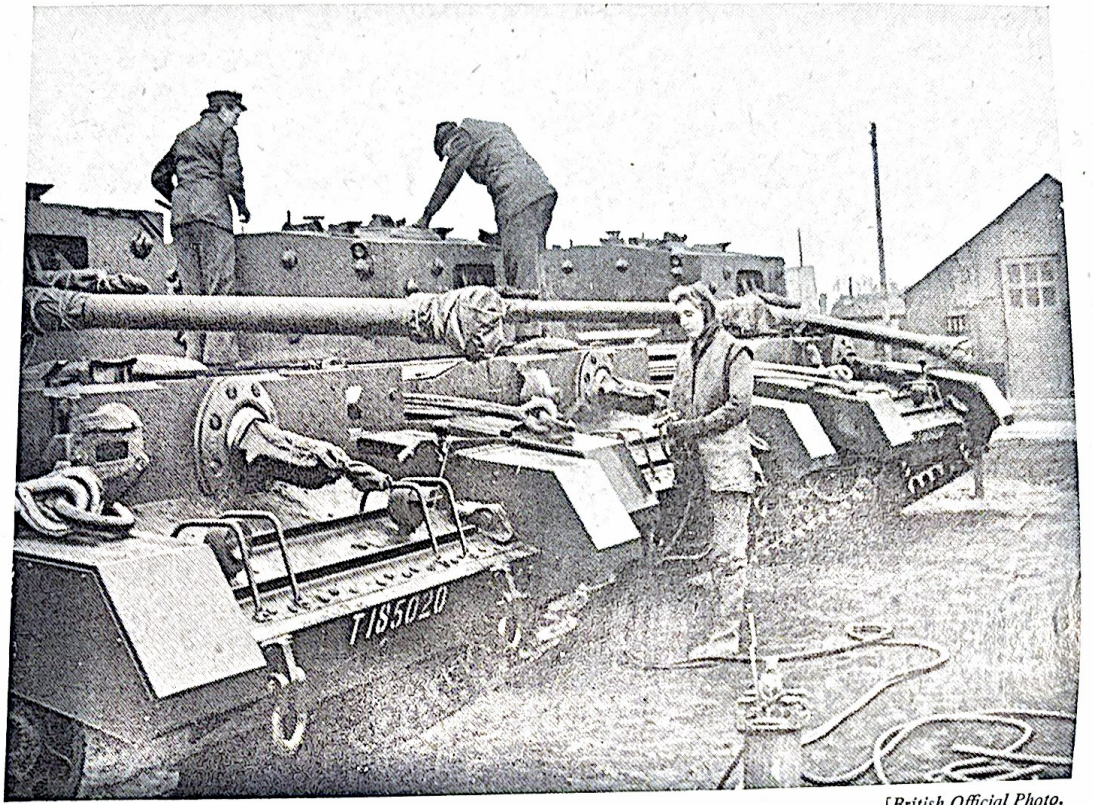

[British Official Photo.

The Cromwell tanks are ready.

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a tough life. They need all the light relief we can provide. D'you mind if we cast an eye over the gardens ? There's a competition on for the best one and I'm judging it.''

The ''gardens'' were in most cases strips of flower-beds running along the fronts of the huts, though occasionally one met a carefully tended lawn about the size of a pocket handkerchief, but there was no limit to the ingenuity displayed by their guardians. Some enterprising souls had set up a rustic wooden arch around which a rambler rose twisted young but forceful tendrils—a board in the centre had stencilled on it in rough poker-work the words, ''My Home in Tennessee.'' There were strips full of gillyflowers and narcissus that smelled sweet in the hot May sun, clumps of blue, pink and yellow lupins, clusters of budding pinks, roses of all sorts, standard, bush and climbing, a brave show of bright Siberian wallflowers, hedges of sturdily growing sweetpeas.

All the huts—which were A.T.S. sleeping quarters—bore names. ''Kosy Kot'' was next to ''Dunroamin',' ''Restknow'' was neighbour to ''Iona Cottage,'' but when I came to one called ''The Mechanics' Larder''I stood and gazed.

''What on earth . . . . ?''

At that moment a small Auxiliary dashed out of the door and down the path. I said politely, ''D'you mind telling me why you chose this name for your hut ?''

''Why yes, ma'am,'' her voice had the pleasant Cockney twang. ''It's the name of a pub near home in the Gray's Inn Road. Seemed kind of suitable for us here.''

(Only later, when I had been through the shops, did I fully understand her remark.)

As we progressed further up the hill, stopping at intervals to admire gardening efforts, we met a party of Auxiliaries some two hundred and fifty strong marching down to their work.

''We have three shifts here,'' the officer told me. ''These girls have had an early dinner and will finish about nine o'clock tonight. They have breaks, of course, for meals. The drawback is they have to trek all the way up

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and down the hill each time. It's very nice in weather like this, but it's not so good in the winter.''

''They look extraordinarily fit ?''

''Tell the M.O. that — she'll bless you ! As a matter of fact they do keep amazingly well considering the amount of work they get through. Last winter we had mighty little sickness and *no* epidemics.''

We walked into the Officers' Mess and I knew momentary panic. I had visited many ''atteries'' ; never had I been confronted by so many of their officers all at once.

The Controller saw my bewilderment. ''We don't bite,'' she said as she invited me to sit down beside her. ''I know there seem an awful lot of us but we've got close on 3,000 girls here, quite a handful. After lunch I'll take you round.''

My ignorance of Ordnance Depots was appalling. ''What exactly do you all do here ?''

''M'm, that's a big question and it would take hours to answer it fully, but you know how highly mechanised the Army is nowadays ? Well, we send them the armour, from tanks to bullet-proof cars. Every piece of armour passes through here for testing, greasing, sealing, packing, labelling and—ever heard of an 'arcticised' tank ?''

''No.''

''It means a tank which is treated in a certain way before it is sent to, say, Russia, so that it will operate satisfactorily in that climate. We 'desertise' tanks too, for Africa.''

Going down the hill to the workshops she said suddenly, ''I'm glad you've come to see my poppets. We're mighty proud of them, you know. Three years ago nobody would have believed girls could tackle some of these jobs without breaking down under them, but they've proved they can not only do the work but stay fit—maybe fitter than they ever were before.''

''Do they work alongside the men ?''

''In many cases, yes. It really depends on the type of job but generally you'll find a mixed team with the girls

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doing the lighter work and the men the heavy lifting and so forth. There are civilians here too, you know, hundreds of them, but the Auxiliaries don't work with them unless we have a 'Number One Priority' rush.''

''What's that ?''

''Ah, that's one of our full steam ahead periods when we all get straws in our hair and think we'll never, never get the stuff through by the given date. We do though, somehow, and the girls are marvellous. You see, for security reasons we can't actually tell them *why* there's a sudden rush on, *why* they must work overtime by day and night ; but they sense the urgency and go simply all out. They get their reward sometimes months later when news of a landing or a big battle is published and then they'll twinkle as they pass me, as much as to say, ' We got the job done, didn't we ? '''

II

It will be long before I forget my first afternoon spent in that Ordnance Depot. We went first to watch the Auxiliaries working with the tanks. Very small they looked, these girls in dungarees with khaki kerchiefs round their heads, as they swarmed over the huge armoured vehicles testing screws, greasing nipples, checking every part of the equipment.

''You might not think greasing was a skilled job,'' said the Controller, ''but believe me, it is ! The greatest care has to be taken over it and these girls would never forgive themselves if a tank went out of here deficient in grease or oil.''

We moved on to where more Auxiliaries were busy covering all metal parts with anti-rust preservative, a revolting dirty job which didn't seem to worry them one whit for they were all either whistling or singing—the faculty of the A.T.S. for song in any circumstances always amazes me. Even from the pits below the

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"recce" cars which were being serviced floated the strains of "The Whistling Mother-in-Law," and a child covered in black grease who was perched atop a tank was singing lustily that there would "be no promotion this side of the ocean."

"We get all kinds of tanks in here," said the Controller, "so the girls have to be pretty nippy as each make requires different handling."

Next we visited what was known as the "upholsterers' shop," where Auxiliaries were recovering sorbo cushions with leather and making the semicircular headrests on which the man in the tank leans his forehead when he wishes to look through the periscope. Some of these girls had trained in upholstery before the war ; but most had only learnt the trade since joining the Army. Six of them were sitting at the largest sewing-machines imaginable running up canvas hoods, curtains and aprons for different vehicles, and I asked one what she had done in peacetime.

"Upholstery," she answered, "but when you've worked with tapestry and cretonne, canvas is a bit of a come-down ! Still, it's far more use at the moment You know, every time I make a hood I wonder if my husband will get that particular one. He's in the Middle East."

I watched an Auxiliary wrestling with an extremely resilient sorbo cushion that seemed determined not to go into its leather cover.

"You get one like this sometimes," she panted. "Honestly, you'd think the wretched thing was alive !"

But before we left the shop I noticed she had that cushion well under control.

In another shop the welders were hard at it, wearing dark glasses to save their eyes from the glare and holding shields before their faces to prevent injury. Their job was to weld armament parts together, while further on we saw girls oiling, greasing and preserving the guns which would presently be fitted on to the tanks.

"Grease, grease, and yet more grease," I said to the

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Controller as I slithered across a concrete floor.

"We thrive on it. Come and see the wireless experts, they're rather fun."

Each tank that entered the Depot had its wireless set and fittings removed by a mixed party of A.T.S. and soldiers, who checked them and put them away safely in store until the tank was fully serviced. Then the wireless sets were replaced and extensive testing of headphones and microphones carried out. To ensure this was complete it was necessary for someone to take the place of the wireless operator in the tank and someone else to take the place of each member of the crew in turn—the tank commander, the gunner and so on. First a conversation was held between wireless operator and other members of the crew to ensure the internal extension lines were working properly; then the former spoke to another party testing another tank wireless, sometimes at the far end of the same shed, sometimes in another shed altogether.

The usual form for such conversations is simply, "Can you hear me, over." "Can you hear me, over," until the reply is received, "I am receiving you loud and clear, over," but on the particular afternoon of our visit it had evidently been decided to brighten up the proceedings a trifle, for as we entered the Auxiliary playing the part of the operator was saying, "Hullo there, Ginger, how're you doing?"

"Fine!" came a stentorian Scots voice out of nowhere. "Listen to me. How many dances are you going to give me at the dance on Saturday? I'm not having any more of yon nonsense about you jitter-bugging with Dusty Miller."

"Ooh!" breathed the Auxiliary. "Cave-man, aren't you?"

"Cave-man be damned! You're my girl and you know it."

"Oh, Ginger *dear*, you see . . . My . . .!" Scarlet to the roots of her hair she gazed down on the Controller.

To the latter's eternal credit she paid not the least

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attention but passed on, chatting to me the while. Only when we reached the far end of the shed did she twinkle, "I told you they were fun !"

Further on we came to the stores—or rather part of them, for an enormous space is needed to hold the immense amount of things, from nuts to tank engines, which have to be kept at the Depot. Here A.T.S. storewomen and clerks were checking, invoicing and storing away the contents of the packing-cases or crates which were being delivered all the time by soldiers.

"And they also get everything ready for landing-packs."

Several storewomen were at this particular job, taking from the shelves all the things necessary for each special list, then sending the complete lot through to the sheds where the packers received them. Clerks were preparing vouchers, checking locations and catalogues and pushing through priority orders with a speed which left me open-mouthed.

"All practice," said the A.T.S. sergeant in charge, cheerfully. "When I started here I was all thumbs, but I soon got used to it. And then we've got a wonderful system. Each type of store is always kept on the same shelves and everything is listed." She pointed to these lists nailed up at the end of each shelf.

"But you have so many different articles ?"

"Yes, the last count was thirteen hundred odd."

If I had been that sergeant I should have given up an unequal struggle, but she remained calm and methodical in the midst of her welter of machinery.

In the packing shed a terrific amount of business was going on. At a long bench ranged along one side some fifty Auxiliaries were dealing with bearings, piston-rings and similar delicate parts which all required to be coated in mineral jelly and wrapped individually in grease-proof paper before being packed into strong cardboard boxes. The filled boxes were then passed on to another batch of girls who fixed a contents list on the outside of each, securing it under a transparent waterproof tape These lists are highly necessary, for while the main object

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in preparing landing-packs is to ensure that nothing can be damaged in transit whether it be immersed in sea-water or buried in sand, the danger of wasting time through insufficient content-listing and labelling has to be guarded against also, and if the soldier can tell at a glance what particular store he is unpacking then he blesses the Auxiliary who affixed the list.

The landing-packs themselves stood in rows in the centre of the shed, solid wooden boxes, waterproof lined. Deftly the girls popped in the cartons, careful to see that each had its list uppermost and that no atom of space was wasted ; while others fitted camouflaged rope handles to the packs.

Even then the job was not finished. Along came a team of Auxiliaries wheeling a huge palette of multi-coloured paints on a trolley and proceeded to stencil cryptic signs and numbers on the sides of the boxes. These give clear indication as to contents and are memorised by the R.A.O.C. beach detachments so that no time need be lost when destination is reached ; and as extra safe-guard a facsimile contents list is placed by an Auxiliary *outside* the pack under a simply unscrewed metal guard.

"Now the loading," said the Controller.

With difficulty I tore myself away from watching a girl pack batteries containing acid in a specially shaped pack so that there was no least risk of their upsetting, and went out to the yard where girls were lashing packs together and hooking the ropes to a crane—also manned by an Auxiliary. As the crane swung its load slowly towards some waiting railway trucks other girls jumped aboard, unlashed the packs and stowed them ready for their long journey to some port.

When it is remembered that every type of fighting vehicle, from the smallest Bren gun carrier to the biggest tank, is serviced from these packs it is easy to realise the magnitude of this job which the A.T.S. perform—and they do the whole thing, from selecting tiny washers from the stores to driving motor trucks laden with tons of goods around the Depot.

As we turned from the yard to make our way up the

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hill we passed a kind of giant's car-park, where tanks by the score were standing, not neatly in line, but in what looked like to be somewhat haphazard fashion.

"Don't worry," said the Controller, "every one of those occupies a place corresponding to a mark on what is called the 'location chart'—there's method in it although it looks untidy. By the way, have you ever seen a tank's identity card ?"

One was produced for my inspection and I studied it with interest for it bore not only a number but a full record of service, while attached was a "medical card" showing the dates it had been inspected and the amount and type of work carried out upon it.

"Thorough, aren't we ?"

But I didn't answer. I was staring at the side of a tank. On it in red was some familiar Russian lettering.

"Where did that come from ?"

"The A.T.S., of course ! Our stencillers rather pride themselves on the different languages they're learning. After all, it isn't much use sending a tank to Murmansk with English instructions on it."

Plodding up the hill the Controller said, "You're very quiet ?"

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking 'The Mechanics' Larder' was an excellent name for that hut."

III

Afterwards I talked to the M.O. and the dentist.

"Yes, it's true," said the former, "we have remarkably little serious illness. Last winter we had two pneumonias, neither of them really bad ; and, of course, we have a certain number of appendix cases, but dire ailments are rare. In a place such as this you're bound, unfortunately, to have accidents—heavy weights dropped on feet and so on, but I find the girls extremely careful on the whole."

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"What about the 'mikers '? " asked the dentist darkly.

"Oh, those ! They're always with me, my old faithfuls. As soon as I see through one dodge they think up another—the one thing to do is to order some most unpleasant cure. Even then they'll come hopefully back complaining of the same disease. But if anyone's going to tell me you won't get a few malingerers among 3,000 women, then I shan't believe them. The marvel to me is we don't get more, for most of the jobs here are the kind I'd personally run a mile from. Toothy's lucky—the 'mikers' don't bother her that much."

"Too afraid of the drill," grinned Toothy. "That's my trouble—all my patients detest me. At the same time I pride myself that my fell work has made a vast difference to their mouths. When I think of the Odol smiles I've saved ! Why, in peace-time half these girls never went near a dentist unless they had a screaming toothache ; now they're pushed along to me regularly."

" Then there are the 'trick-cyclist' cases," said the M.O. "They're the most difficult to deal with. It stands to reason that you get a certain number of women who are psychologically unsuited to the Service. They can't help it—but we do all we can to help them, send them to a specialist, draft them out if nothing can be done. Quite often though we effect amazing cures—all by our little selves. It's wonderful what can be done by changing a girl's job or moving her to another sleeping hut."

The Education officer bustled in. "There you are ! Come along and see the Art class."

The Art class was held in a big airy hut where twenty-odd serious faced Auxiliaries sat before their easels and two others skipped from pupil to pupil advising the alteration of a line here, a shadow there. Both these instructors had been art students in civil life, while their pupils—all of them entirely voluntary—had hopes of becoming art students some day. It was a life class, and the model—believe it nor not !—was a rugged faced R.A.O.C. sergeant-major who seemed to be enjoying his role immensely.

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"They're good little girls," he informed me in a hoarse whisper. "There ain't much to do of an evening, an' if they get a kick out of drawing my phiz—well, I don't mind."

One of the tutors looked up and put a finger to her lip. We tiptoed out feeling the Art class was a solemn business.

We wandered into another hut where about fifty Auxiliaries were cutting-out, stuffing and sewing a magnificent collection of animal toys. One girl had made a delicious family of penguins ; another was concentrating on a life-like monkey (it had begun life as a velour hat) ; a third was fashioning an elephant complete with howdah and trappings—but everywhere you looked you saw birds, animals, fish.

" Christmas presents," said the Education officer.

"In May ?"

"Oh, you don't understand ! We start ours in January. You see, there's tremendous rivalry among the different companies as to who will make the most toys. In the autumn we're going to have a sale in aid of a war charity. Of course, the girls can mark their own toys 'sold' if they want to buy them for relations or friends. It was an awful job getting them keen on the work to begin with—now I can't stop them !"

From the toy-shop we visited one of the recreation huts. Here girls lounged in easy chairs, scribbled letters at the desks, clustered round the piano—singing as usual. Some read, others sewed or mended, a few just smoked and stared drowsily at nothing, glad to relax after the long day's work. The place was as pleasant as a hut could be with flowers in the corners and pictures on the walls.

" But it's still a hut," sighed the Education officer. "I feel we all get so mighty sick of huts !"

We then did a lightning circuit of a country-dancing class, a cooking demonstration and a shorthand-typing class before ending up in the gymnasium where Auxiliaries were swarming up ropes, vaulting a "horse," and hanging face downwards from the monkey-bars.

"The gym is frightfully popular," said the Education

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officer with pride.

"Education seems a pretty wide word here ? "

"I wish it were wider yet ! It's so important to have simply lots of things going on here for the girls to do in their free time. We have a cinema twice a week but a great many of them prefer *doing* something themselves rather than watching flicks. I know the city is fairly near but then there's the difficulty of transport. By the way, we're having a grand pantomime at Christmas. Can you possibly pay us another visit then ? "

When we got back to the ante-room the Controller was not there.

" She's still working," they said.

I glanced at the clock. It was 9.30 p.m.

"Oh, that's nothing ! She literally never stops unless we go down to her office in a body and simply drag her away."

I was staying overnight in her bungalow, and it was well after ten when she appeared. She was not a young woman, and there were little lines of fatigue under her eyes. Since eight that morning she had been interviewing her officers and N.C.O.'s ; listening to the personal problems of some of her flock ; smoothing out difficulties ; planning, guiding, altering so that the smooth running of the vast A.T.C. establishment might be assured. In addition she had spent valuable hours escorting me round the shops, and as I looked at her tired face I felt guilty.

"You must go to bed at once."

"No fear ! I want to know how you got on with my poppets, how you liked them, what you think of their work ?"

"They're grand. It's hard to put what I feel about them into a handful of words, but two things stand out—their energy and their happiness."

She smiled. "I'm so glad about the happiness."

Then she told me how the Depot had grown, how with the pressing needs of war more and more girls had been drafted into it. She did not eulogise them. She did not gloss over their faults. She was perfectly frank concern-

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ing the trials and tribulations which had beset the task of looking after the spiritual, mental, moral and physical well-being of thousands of women; but I wished—and always shall wish—that the people I have heard from time to time bewailing the conditions in the A.T.S. could have listened to her. One fact shone out clearly: she wasn't only the "boss," the "big shot," the "old girl" of the women who spoke of her by these various nicknames—she was their friend.

IV

I went back to the Depot many times. I saw the magnificent pantomime, in which the Controller played low comedy in ermine-tipped robes and a tiara, and a tradeswoman-cook made an entrancing Principal Boy and the whole level of the production wasn't far short of west-end standards. I went to a party in the sergeants' mess, and a gymnastic display, and a dance where I saw my wireless telephonist of the tank revolving blissfully in the arms of a corporal who, from the colour of his hair, was "Ginger" of that far-off day. I talked to the Auxiliaries about Russia and China and was astounded by the shrewdness of their questioning, and I attended discussion groups on subjects ranging from post-war houses to careers for women in the engineering trade.

Once I struck a "Number One Priority" rush.

The moment I passed through gates and guard-room I knew there was something afoot. I don't quite know why, because everybody always moved quickly at the Depot, and there were always large groups of A.T.S. and R.A.O.C. marching to and from the shops; but this day people seemed to walk more purposefully and the very air was full of tension. Climbing the hill I met a party of A.T.S. going down to their shift. Was it my fancy, or were their faces paler than usual, their features more set? A sergeant I knew smiled at me, but it was a hurried smile gone in a flash, and several other girls of my acquaint-

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ance marched by without glancing to right or left, frowning as if in concentration.

"Ha !" said the Education officer, "come right in and make yourself at home ; but don't expect any talks or discussion groups today. You always said you wanted to see us full out—well, you've bettered your wish. You find us battling with the father and mother of *all* 'Number One Priorities.' Nobody's seen the Controller more than a minute the last week so you're lucky. She's just vanished into her office and wants to see you."

I found her sitting at her desk surrounded by papers. She had looked weary before : now her features seemed to have dwindled to half their usual size. As ever she was immensely cheerful.

"Sorry we couldn't find you to let you know our 'do' for tonight is off. Everybody's working all the hours God sends. Don't ask me what it's all about, but we've got only another forty-eight hours to the deadline and how we're going to make it heaven knows ! Do stay overnight as arranged, if you don't mind scrounging for your own food. You'll find it interesting. Pay no attention if people grunt and snap—we're scarcely human at the moment."

"How right she is !" groaned a Junior Commander, as we walked along to the Mess. "We're not flesh and blood at all these days, we're just robots. Oh, lord, look at my paws !" She held out blackened hands with broken, discoloured nails. "I'll never strafe my company again for being grubby. I've plastered these with issue hand-cream but it's made precious little difference."

There were no orderlies in the Mess. They had all been co-opted and officers helped themselves from the cold dishes on a side-table, at one end of which tea and coffee urns hissed. Normally at lunch-time some eighty officers would be having their meal, but today people popped in and out at random, munched their food abstractedly and at speed, poured coffee and forgot to drink it, wandered around with plates in their hands.

"We eat because we must," said a Senior Commander.

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"I've even lost my sense of taste. I know this veal and ham pie's good, but to me it's exactly like sawdust. Hi there, Tommy, got those lists? We might check up on them while we feed."

Everyone looked strangely altered. As a rule these women were immaculate, each hair in place, each button polished. Now they had a slightly scruffy appearance and their noses shone and several had tell-tale smears of grease on cheek or tunic.

"Where's the M.O. ?" demanded somebody.

"In the tank shop. *And* Toothy's on landing packs. If you require any medical or dental care, my pet, you'll just have to grin and bear it."

"I say, did you know the Controller drove a truck yesterday when the driver went sick ?"

"M'm, jolly good show. Did you hear the Brig. this morning ? Took one look at the tank wireless stores and said, 'Ahem, ahem ! Those can be cleared in thirty-six hours.' *Thirty-six* ! Saints alive, it'll take a week at least !"

"Heaven save us from what he'll say when he visits our shed. I counted ball-bearings in my sleep last night. Oh, Phyllis, I'll be on till the wee sma' hours, can I borrow your Thermos ? "

"My sergeant's a miracle. She was afraid she'd go to sleep over her typewriter so she bribed a corporal to stick pins in her every half-hour."

"You know that square solid little lance-corporal of mine, the one with the black frizzy hair ? She deserves a B.E.M., that one. Half the Depot fell on her right foot yesterday, but she's carrying on in a sort of felt boot. Absolutely refused to go sick."

The Senior Commander scraped back her chair. "' How long, O Lord, how long ? ' Well, my children, see you later."

I sat in the Mess all afternoon watching the officers as they straggled in in relays, for there could be no settled mealtimes on days such as these. Two harassed cooks came in, cleared the tables, replenished the urns and

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vanished again. Five disconsolate dogs of varying breeds huddled by the stove unable to understand this sudden disturbance of routine. The Controller's cat and the kitchen cat had a stand-up fight on the windowsill. Somewhere an Auxiliary sang softly, but she didn't sing about mothers-in-law or barrels or oceans.

"Bring me my bow of burning gold,
Bring me my arrows of desire . . ."

"Jerusalem" may be hackneyed, sentimental, anything you like: it was so strangely suitable to the place and circumstances that I got a lump in my throat listening to Blake's words.

And the clock above the door ticked on. As the officers appeared they glanced up at it, timed their munches by it, eyed it again as they went out. Involuntarily I kept eyeing it myself, thinking: there aren't forty-eight hours now, only forty-six and a half . . . forty-five and three quarters . . . Oh, let them do it, let them do it!

"Hullo," said a voice; "penny for them?"

"I was thinking about 'England's green and pleasant land.' I say, how're things going?"

"Lousy! Five cartons with wrong contents lists. Oh, my, oh, my, why did I join the Army? Anyone who thinks England's green and pleasant should come on the Depot strength for a bit. Could you shove over that salad? Thanks."

Unable to bear sight of the clock-face any longer I took myself a walk. The A.T.S. camp was deserted. No laughter or singing came from the huts. In some of them drawn blinds told that the occupants were enjoying much needed rest. In a few hours they would be on the job again packing, sorting, listing, oiling, testing. There was still a feeling of tenseness in the air.

The evening was the same as the afternoon, a continual coming and going, a tremendous number of snatched conversations—most of them highly technical. The dogs looked more dejected and even the cats gave up

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fighting and the singing Auxiliary was mute. In the chair next me in the anteroom one of the Senior Commanders dozed, long legs stretched out. Presently she sat up with a jerk. "Heavens! Ten o'clock already. I must make tracks for bed, I start duty again at six. Come and get a breath of air first, I'm all muzzy with being stuck indoors all day."

She opened a door leading to the verandah and put her hand up to her tunic pocket for her cigarette case. Very soon she would wear above that pocket the dull pink ribbon of the M.B.E. Very soon too we should hear the news of the North African landings. But we didn't know these things then; all we knew was that the clock hands were racing round as if determined the "father and mother of all Number One Priorities" wouldn't be finished on time.

We lit cigarettes and leaned over the rail, staring ahead into the darkness. It was a black, still night, without a star in the sky and heavy with the threat of rain. Suddenly a rhythmic sound came from the distance, grew nearer, rose and fell. Tramp—tramp—tramp—the A.T.S. night-shift were going down to their work. They marched in perfect time like soldiers—but nobody would ever have mistaken their steps for those of soldiers. I cannot explain the effect that rhythmic sound had upon me. "Left, right. Left, right. Left—left—left." shouted the sergeant in charge. The company were right below us now, but the night was so black we could not see them, we could only listen to their footsteps. All night long these girls would work in the stuffy blacked-out sheds.

The Senior Commander tossed her cigarette end over the rail. "My God, I'm tired! This past week has been one mad scamper. It can't be true we'll get through in less than two days' time. I feel I have no bones and no brain, what's worse that I'll never possess any again."

"Your job's worth it. After all, 'you send them the armour.'"

I could feel her straighten beside me in the dark.

"Yes," she agreed. "We send them the armour."

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[*British Official Photo.*

" Never put your bread dough . . . ."

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" Is the stew good ? "

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CHAPTER IV

THEY HELP THE ARMY MARCH

I

"WHEN I heard we were to train girl bakers for the Army," said the Master Baker, "I was dead against the idea. For one thing, I was sure they'd never tackle such a heavy job, and for another—well, if you've served with the R.A.S.C. as long as I've done you get a bit conservative in your views. However, in the first batch came—seven of them—in February '42, just three years ago. I often think now we were hard on them. I couldn't see them becoming special tradeswomen and the men resented them being here at all at first. It says a lot for the girls that they stuck both us and the job ! Here is a record of their progress I've made out for you."

The list he handed me had several interesting points. It showed how from very small beginnings the A.T.S. bakery branch had been built up until a total of four hundred and five girls had been trained in this huge bake-house which is the "parent" one of all those supplying the Army at home and overseas. It was cautiously worded, stating fairly that about a third of the trainees had failed to make the grade and giving details of the difficulties with which they had to contend—their lack of height and reach, the length of working hours, the three-shift system which debarred them from several social activities, the monotony of the job and the strain of working in a hot atmosphere that was mighty hard to

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ventilate properly.

"I suppose they do feel the monotony a good deal?"

"Not so much as you might think. We switch them over from one process to another each week or so. First they'll be adding the water and yeast to the flour, then they'll be lifting the dough from the mixers and feeding it into the shaping and cutting machine, then brushing the loaves or taking them off the hot plates or wheeling the trolleys or working in the store. The work has variety all right, it's more the monotony of being in the bakehouse itself that's apt to get people down—though I will say the girls face up to it better than the men."

"I see you sent some of them to try field baking on exercise and the experiment didn't work?"

"That's true. We had our ups and downs in the first year as all pioneers must have and we found out our limitations; but that doesn't alter the fact that the A.T.S. girls have turned out splendidly as bakers. Turn to the last page of the record."

I read: "The amount of bread produced chiefly by A.T.S. bakers since they started baking on their own at the main bakery is 50,000,000 pounds."

"And that's only here," said the Master Baker. "In addition we have three static bakeries opened and run by girls we've trained. I'll tell you another thing too. In one of the biggest invasion exercises they had a daily output of 82,000 lbs. for eight weeks against an all men output of 68,250 lbs. That's no mean performance! As for the overload before D Day when they were helped by two mobile bakeries of 21st Army Group and one from Western Command—well, it was a grand business."

The Master Baker was warming to his subject, and as I reverted to his record I found that warming up too. "H Company A.T.S. was formed . . . and we owe the Junior Commander a lot from those pioneer days." "Girls of the following different nationalities have passed their Army trade test: Welsh, English, Scottish, Czech, Shetland, German, Swiss, Falkland Islands, Manx and Irish." "A.T.S. have replaced men as issuers in the

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bread stores and are real hardworking and all-weather girls.'' ''The girls here have worked right through, always ready to receive what may come. They have had 266 air raids and warnings, of which 115 were flying bomb raids.'' Finally, a lovely touch, ''A.T.S. bakers make up their own songs about their work in the bakehouse.''

Those remarks from a Regimental Sergeant-major who was dead against Auxiliaries as Army bakers three brief years ago are pretty good.

''Now,'' said the Master Baker, ''the Quartermaster will take you through the bakehouse to see the girls at work.''

''We'll start on the top floor,'' said the latter, ''and see the sacks of flour being tipped into the chutes. It is one of the two jobs Auxiliaries aren't allowed to do. The other is to place the loaves on the hot plates. The Medical Authorities say such work is too hard for them.''

Having inspected the chutes we came down to the middle floor, where immense activity was going on. It was staffed entirely by Auxiliaries who looked very trim in long white overalls and white slacks and seemed extremely busy on different jobs.

In one corner two girls stood beside a giant mixer, one weighing out yeast and the other drawing buckets of water from a tap set in the wall. These jobs finished they tilted water and yeast into the mixer where an enormous metal arm pounded the dough.

''An' if ye examine yon arm,'' explained the yeast-weigher, ''ye'll find it's just the same as a human one. It's got a wrist joint and an elbow joint—my, it's marvellous !''

She came from Angus and had a father who had said she was ''gey saft'' to join the Army. ''But he'll no' say that when I start ma own wee bakery in our village,'' she added.

''Coo,'' said her companion, ''you're barmy. Me, I'll never eat bread again if I can help it !''

''Don't you like the job then ?''

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She winked at me. "Grand—I just like taking a rise out of Mac. C'mon, Mac, this lot's ready."

To my horror the pair got behind the mixer and began to push it. I knew it held over five hundred pounds of flour. "Well, talk about heavy work!"

The Quartermaster smiled. "It's on wheels."

Abashed, I followed and watched the mixer being parked beside a row of its fellows and covered with a large white cloth.

"They leave the dough to rise for three hours or so; then it is ready for the next process."

This was one which intrigued me. Two Auxilaries plunged their arms into the sticky mess and lifted a great lump while a third cut their load free with a wooden knife; then they swung the stuff into the maw of a machine that shaped it into loaves and two more girls rolled these lightly in flour and sent them spinning down a chute to the ground floor.

I said, "Now this really *is* heavy work. Those lumps must weigh forty or fifty pounds apiece!"

"Ah, but funnily enough the girls feel the weight far less than men do. In this job, for example, they use their abdominal muscles. Now in a man those muscles are not so strong. If *he's* lifting dough he puts the strain on his back and his legs."

The girls themselves grinned happily when I asked if the work tired them.

"We're used to it—it's all knack. I've been here two and a half years and my mate two. We're both Class One bakers," she added proudly.

"Oh, we get fed up sometimes," said the other, "but you get that way in Civvy Street, so what? Besides, you feel you're doing something useful when you're feeding the boys."

"I can understand that. After all, 'an army marches on its stomach.'"

"That's a good crack," remarked a third Auxiliary. "I must remember that one."

We left them repeating Napoleon's maxim and

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descended to the ground floor. Here girls were setting the loaves on to trays as they came out of the chutes, brushing them over, wheeling trolley-loads aside to rise again, stamping them with the date.

"Only me and the Master Baker know the mark for today's date," said a small girl from Yorkshire. "Even the Quartermaster doesn't know it. But if any complaints come in, loaves have to be returned too, and we know at once which day's baking they belong to."

On the far side of the bakehouse were the great ovens set in the wall. When the doors were opened and the long hot plates drawn out men tipped the uncooked loaves on to them ; but the part which fascinated me was to see the Auxiliaries at work on the same plates when the baked bread was removed from the ovens. They worked as a team, precisely and deftly, two of them separating the loaves which had stuck together, two sliding sixty loaves at a time on to a tray which they then placed on a trolley, two wheeling the laden trolleys away to the stores, one brushing the browned flour off the hot plates before they clanged back again into the oven.

So soon as one batch of loaves was dealt with there seemed to be another ready for attention, and I said to the Quartermaster, "There isn't much let-up between jobs, is there ?"

"No, and an eight-hour shift is a long time ; but they do have ten-minute breaks in turns as well as their meal-times. I'll show you the mess-room. It's a bit dingy and we're not very proud of it, but improvements are on the way."

Certainly the mess-room was smallish and rather dark, but it possessed a bright fire in a kitchen range and the Auxiliaries who were drinking tea seemed quite satisfied.

"It's this way, ma'am," said a sergeant. "If we feed here while on duty we don't need to change our kit and go out in the cold to our billets. Bakers like to be cosy, you know."

As the month was January, 1945, I agreed with her view, but asked if she felt the same way in summertime.

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"Yes, that's the funny thing about the bakehouse. Even if it's hot outside, we're still—well, just cosy in here."

"It's true," nodded her Junior Commander, who had just appeared. "Of course, one of our difficulties is that the bakers become liable to cold and chills in their off-duty time. We guard against these as much as possible but they are a danger we can't altogether remove."

I remember something. "Why are the girls allowed to take the loaves *off* the hot plates when they're forbidden to put them on ?"

The Quartermaster answered : "Because it's not such a long job. It doesn't involve so much stooping over a plate just removed from a temperature of between 480 and 500 degrees Fahrenheit. Would you like to see the stores now ?"

"One minute." Turning to the eight or nine Auxiliaries in the mess-room, I asked : "Would any of you prefer to be in another branch of the Service ?"

They said "No" loudly and firmly—and it wasn't because their officer and the Quartermaster were present. It was too definite for that.

"Funny thing," remarked the latter confidentially as we made our way across the bakehouse, "we have a wireless here for them—a loud-speaker on each floor, just to cheer them up. But they'd rather sing their own songs, believe me."

"Especially the night-shift," added the Junior Commander, "and that's odd, for you'd think girls who come on at ten p.m., knowing they've got to stay here until six the following morning, would like to start off with two hours of radio."

"Oh, well, they're women," said the Quartermaster (as though that fact explained all peculiarities of habit). He went on : "But they're all good girls. When I think how some of them have passed Class One trade tests in a handful of months ! Bless you, I trained seven blinking years !"

The air in the stores struck cold after the warmth of the

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bakehouse, but fortunately the white-clad Auxiliaries who were wheeling in the laden trolleys were moving at too great a speed to feel it. A dozen or so of their colleagues, the "bread issuers," presented a curious contrast for they wore their khaki uniform plus scarves, mittens and wellington boots and were swabbing the concrete floor with vigour.

"The girls do all their own cleaning up both here and in the bakehouse," said the Quartermaster, "and my word, it's *real* cleaning. No finicking about here! Mind, the bread issuers' job is a tough one. It's starving cold in this shed most of the time—see, those big sliding doors are nearly always open so that the vans of the various units we supply can drive right up. The girls check the lists and help the drivers put the bread in the vans."

I looked around the huge place. "How much bread is here now ?"

"At a rough guess 18,000 lbs. It'll be cleared in another hour or so and a fresh lot coming in. All today's baking, of course."

"*All today's baking* !" Thoughtfully I nibbled the piece of warm crusty bread he handed me. It was good bread, it had been made by the A.T.S., it was going to feed the Army.

Back in the Master Baker's office I answered his eager questions as to what I thought of his Auxiliaries, and as I said goodbye he whispered, "Did you hear them singing the song they've made up about me ? It's a grand one!"

On the way out I did hear it. Set to a popular tune the words informed me that he barked and barked all day long—but he hadn't any bite at all !

Not far from the bakehouse stands a very large building which I feel sure the Master Baker would call "a rival establishment." It is in reality the Army School of Cookery, and I sincerely hope nobody ever makes the break I made when I walked into it after several hours of bakehouse tuition, for my first remark was, "And are you attached to the R.A.S.C. too ?"

"We," said the Senior Commander, "are the Army

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Catering Corps.''

She then took pity on my ignorance and explained the manifold activities which went on inside the biggest and most complete cookery school I had ever seen.

''Since this is an Army establishment naturally the bulk of those who come here for courses are men, but there are also three hundred or more A.T.S. officers and other ranks here at any given time. There are courses for officers who will become messing-officers in different units, courses for sergeant cooks who will be in charge of unit cookhouses, refresher courses for sergeant and corporal cooks, and courses for those who wish to become cookery instructors at the A.T.S. cookery schools up and down the country where all below corporal cooks receive their initial training.''

''Do they share classes here with the men ?''

''Sometimes, but not as a rule. Often, however, they are taught by men instructors, although we have a permanent staff of A.T.S. instructors too. They don't only do practical cookery, you know. They have lectures on kitchen management, dietetics, anti-waste, butchery, all kinds of things. But I'm only a visitor. My job is going round inspecting units, seeing the cookhouses are getting their proper supplies, trying to help with difficulties—and, of course, keeping an eye on what goes into the pig-bin. But here comes the Junior Commander who is our chief instructor here. She is going to take us round the school.''

The Junior Commander was a New Zealander, and in pre-war days had studied domestic economy both in her own delectable country and in England.

''Don't you long for sunshine ?'' I asked her.

''Every minute of every day ! Yet I do believe I'll find it awfully hard to leave here after the war. I've kind of grown up with this place, for when I was posted here in 1940 we were in huts and the only signs of this building were some iron poles stuck in the ground. Now we're so busy that even in this vast place it's like fitting a jigsaw puzzle together to get classrooms allotted to all the

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different groups who require them at the same time.''

She took us first to see the potential messing-officers' class, explaining as we entered that they were learning bun, scone and cake making under the guidance of a man who had been chef in a big London hotel.

''You see, it's very important that all messing-officers should know the practical side. It's not a bit of good slanging your sergeant cook in a unit over some fault you couldn't possibly put right yourself. These officers go through a pretty stiff training here, from the vegetable stores to the correct way to lay a table.''

In the big classroom six A.T.S. subalterns were glazing buns, two were weighing out flour, fat and sugar, and the ninth was frying doughnuts that looked as doughnuts ought to look—crisp and a lovely golden brown.

''Morning, ma'am,'' said the chef. ''We're just going to make small cakes, six batches to each pupil.'' Turning to his class he went on: ''Which of you ladies is going to mix the dried milk for me? Ah, but that isn't enough to a gallon of water! Weigh it carefully, please. No, miss'' (this to the doughnut fryer), ''when you take them out of the fat *never* huddle them together like that on the tray. Now then, ladies, you've got your flour ready? Then rub the fat in so—and so——''

Eight pairs of hands got busy: eight pairs of eyes anxiously watched his demonstration. Frankly, I envied them. I could have done with several lessons from that chef myself.

''Every ounce of food eaten in this establishment is cooked by students,'' said the Junior Commander, ''and then we feed several nearby units as well. We cater for roughly a thousand people every day—more at times.''

Our next call was to a huge kitchen where A.T.S. sergeant and corporal cooks were busy putting the finishing touches to the midday meal which would presently be served to five hundred of their fellow students. Mulligatawny soup simmered gently in large cauldrons and the long hot plates which stretched the length of the room were covered with dishes of cottage pie—but not the

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pallid sausagy mess topped by lumpy potatoes that so often disgraces the name of that dish. These cottage pies were made with good fresh meat and stock, the potatoes were sliced and savoury with onion and nicely browned, and two girls were actually sprinkling chopped parsley on them.

The Junior Commander laughed at my amazement. "Oh, yes, everything has to be just so, and we pay particular attention to making things *look* appetising."

The cooks certainly seemed to be taking a real pride in their job. There was no bustle, no jostling of shoulders. Everyone had their appointed task, and only occasionally did the instructor correct or advise.

"Method," I said.

"Yes, we're very hot on that. It's so easy to get 'cookhouse panic' just before the main meal of the day. We'll watch this dinner being served shortly, but come to the butchery class first."

Here a staff sergeant, a man, was standing on a platform behind a wooden block on which reposed a whole side of beef. On the walls hung numerous diagrams of oxen, sheep, calves and pigs, while facing the instructor was a mixed class of men and Auxiliaries. Not only did the staff sergeant demonstrate the correct method of cutting and jointing the beef, but each member of the class had then to give a demonstration in turn and there was quite a bit of rivalry as to which pupil would perform best. Watching, I felt that when the Auxiliaries became housewives themselves, they would be more than a match for any negligent butcher who tried to fob them off with the wrong cut.

As we moved to the door the staff sergeant waved his enormous knife at us. "The lady hasn't seen the refrigerators," he said reproachfully.

Apparently it was a point of honour that all visitors to the butchery must also see where the meat was kept. It wasn't a visit I fancied but as the Auxiliaries had to study refrigerator storage as part of their course I meekly agreed.

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The staff sergeant flipped a diagram round with its face to the wall. "Now before I come back I want you to draw a hindquarter from memory *and* put in the exact method of jointing with lines, letters at the end of them and a key at the bottom."

The refrigerators were worth seeing after all. In them the Auxiliaries learn the correct way of stacking meat, and in the rooms adjoining they learn how to thaw it—a ticklish business, as every housewife knows. The staff sergeant very wisely explained to his pupils that if they forgot his tuition in this matter when they returned to their units and served tough meat in consequence they were liable to receive the joint at their heads from their infuriated comrades.

Having found out that two Auxiliaries had come out top in the hindquarter test we walked into a vast dining-hall. Sheep were separated from goats, the Auxiliaries sitting at one end and the men at the other. They drew their food from two service tables and I noticed the mulligatawny was going down well. A Catering Corps captain kept a watchful eye on the food dishes as they came in, and I saw him send back a cottage-pie because he didn't think it hot enough.

"Do you get many complaints?"

He grinned. "No, except from a few born grousers who would complain if you gave them nectar and ambrosia. The food really *is* up to first-class hotel standard here. We have to set the pace, of course. It's different when cooks are with their units and perhaps have all manner of snags to overcome. Still, we feel the courses here give them a background they don't forget in a hurry."

Our own lunch was simple but excellently cooked and served. We had potato soup, navarin of lamb and pancakes which proved that good ones *can* be made with dried eggs.

Afterwards we followed the Auxiliaries upstairs to their recreation room. Some were chatting in little groups, others were sewing or mending, a few were reading

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and two couples were playing chess.

"Will you finish the game before afternoon classes?" I asked one pair.

"No, but we'll leave the board over in the corner and go on with it this evening—if we're lucky. The trouble is, chess is awfully popular and people are apt to come along and pinch your board."

I stared. Somehow I hadn't imagined Auxiliaries as chess enthusiasts.

"Did you play before you joined the A.T.S.?"

"Goodness, no!" said one. "I'd rather have run a mile—sounded too grim for me. But we learn lots of funny things in the Army. People come in on barrack-room nights to teach us. Y'know, if anyone had told me three years ago I'd spend my evenings stuffing elephants for Christmas toys and learning chess, I'd have told them they were nuts. Hi, Sammy, check to your Queen!"

I thought about those chess-players quite a bit.

III

We reverted to our progress around the Cookery School. We attended a lecture given by a gentle-voiced A.T.S. sergeant-major on food values. She made admirable use of visual training, using clear and colourful charts and diagrams, and she not only knew her stuff from A to Z but put it over in an interesting manner. None of her students, as it happened, had taken the faintest interest in kitchens, cookery or food before the war. Most had been shop assistants or factory hands and had been extremely indignant when told that as the Service needed cooks then cooks they must become. That they were on this course for sergeant cooks showed they had dropped indignation quite a long way behind them, and I liked the shrewdness of the questions they put to their instructor.

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"And to think I used just to open a tin for my evening meal," one said to me. "There'll be none of that in the future."

"Have you any post-war plans?"

"I want a home of my own," she answered promptly.

The majority of Auxiliaries of all categories will give you that reply. For myself, I think the desire comes from a surfeit of communal living and sometimes I wonder if it will last when Service days are over, or if, tragically enough, it will be given the opportunity to become reality.

There are other girls, of course, who have very definite ideas as to post-war careers, and I spoke to several of these in the Cookery School. One was a woman of about forty and I found her having a lesson in fancy cake making from an ex-confectioner who was an artist at his job. She was making *ersatz* but delicious-looking eclairs and was so absorbed in the process that I stood beside her quite five minutes before she even noticed me.

She told me she had looked after an invalid parent until she was thirty, when she was left with no training for anything and no money. So she went out as a "companion help"—euphemistic term!—and for the next seven years endured the eccentricities and grumblings of several elderly ladies who expected a great deal for very little.

"If I'd known what I know now," she said, "I'd have volunteered when war broke out; but I didn't realise they'd accept somebody like me until the lady I was with died and the Labour Exchange people suggested it. Mind you, I didn't like it at first. It was awful sharing a hut with women much younger than myself, and I felt kind of frightened, if you know what I mean. Then I settled down and found I was really *happy*. And look what the Army's taught me! Why, I wouldn't have had a chance of a training like this on my own. D'you know what I'm going to do after the war? I'm going to have my own little room and I'm going out cooking dinners."

For bringing happiness to that woman with the tired, lined face, if for nothing else, I take my hat off to the

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A.T.S.

Younger women in the various classes were full of more ambitious plans. Some wanted to open cafés or confectioners' shops, some to get a job in hotel or institution, some to go in for a Domestic Science degree. All I talked to were enjoying the Cookery School and were keen to take improved ideas back to their units.

As a Welsh girl said, "You learn all the little things here that we never had time to reach in our initial training. Besides, being a tradesman cook *is* something !"

We paid a visit to the vegetable store, a draughty but spotlessly clean place presided over by an enormous sergeant who took a great interest in his Auxiliaries. "They don't like this bit of their training at first," he confided, "too chilly for them in the winter after the warm cookhouse. But as I say to them, 'You'll never serve a decent meal unless you know how to look after your vegetables.' They make faces and grumble a bit, but they're good girls."

He bustled off to show two Auxiliaries how to set frozen cabbages on racks that they might thaw, and I said to the Junior Commander, " I shouldn't imagine the vegetable store is popular ?"

"Not while they're actually in it. Afterwards they quote the sergeant's words of wisdom at me. I had a long harangue the other day from a corporal on the correct way to clean celery."

The sergeant came back. " I let 'em off light, too. I allow them to peel the spuds in the cookhouse instead of out here like the men. But mind you, ma'am, they pick things up quicker and are more careful than the lads are."

"Instinct, sergeant."

"M'm, maybe, but it was an instinct a whole lot of them were lacking in before this lot came along. They'll make good wives some day, my girls will. I'm always telling the men, ' You take my advice and marry an A.T.' "

Upon leaving him we walked into more classrooms, looked in at more lectures, finally came to rest in a large

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room where a sergeant-major (male) presided over a mixed class who were being given a practical demonstration in bun-making by one of their own number.

"I make them all get up on their hind-legs," said the sergeant-major. "Gives them confidence, trains them to give clear instructions to their assistant cooks when they go back to their units. Take this fellow who's talking now. He's home from overseas, been doing emergency cooking in slit trenches and what have you—and a hard job it is in the field, as I know. But is he dumb when he gets on his feet! Now the A.T.S., they're different altogether. Think they know all the answers until I make them demonstrate; then they start mumbling and blushing—but come the end of the course, bless you, they're proper public speakers! After this chap's finished the class are going to make batches of buns. Suppose you come back in an hour's time, ma'am, and see our finished products?"

That sergeant-major was a delight. I accepted the invitation with pleasure.

Further wandering brought us to the store-cupboards, where I indulged in a little mouth-watering. Ranged along one side was a row of ordinary dustbins transformed by khaki paint decorated with the blue and gold of the Army Catering Corps colours into things of beauty. These held rice, barley and similar commodities and above them were shelves stacked to the ceiling with tins of various descriptions; but the part of the store which fascinated me was the bottled fruit and vegetable cupboard, for here were glowing cherries, soft red strawberries, pears, apples, chutneys, French and runner beans, asparagus, peas—a profusion of the fruits of the earth which made me long for the days of peace and plenty.

"You may leave me here," I told the Junior Commander. "I can't possibly tear myself away."

She smiled. "All bottled by the students."

The Auxiliary in charge of the store beamed. "They are lovely, aren't they? I've been here over a year and I dread the thought of being posted away."

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I couldn't have agreed with anybody more.

Reluctantly I moved on to a cookhouse which smelt of thyme and marjoram and sage.

"We have our own herb garden here," said the Junior Commander, "with every herb known in England and a few that aren't. I do try to make the girls understand the use of herbs as flavouring."

That morning the class had been making brawn and galantine—two things which sounded extravagant in the sixth year of total war, but which were literally made out of bits and pieces.

"Where we score in the Army," said the sergeant instructor, "is in the numbers of people we always have to cater for, because that means we have innumerable odds and ends, plenty of bones for good stock, lots of bacon rinds. Take this brawn now, its main ingredient is bacon rind simmered for five or six hours. Would you like to taste it, ma'am ?"

The brawn was delicious. If anyone had asked me I should have said an entire pig's head had gone to its making. The galantine was equally good and the class grinned delightedly when I told them so.

"Not bad for their second day," said the sergeant. "Pity you won't be here at the end of the week. They'll be really proficient by then."

We popped our heads in at a lecture on kitchen management and then found ourselves in the pastry cookhouse, where Auxiliaries were turning out Cornish pasties and sausage rolls with great success under a withering fire of criticism from their man instructor.

"They don't mind though," said the Junior Commander, "because they know he's the cat's pyjamas at his job. I think he'd make the least pastry-minded girl develop a light hand."

It was now time for our return to the bun department, and my nose began to twitch before we reached the door. And what a sight met our eyes as we entered the room ! Everywhere we looked we saw trays full of buns. Plain buns, currant buns, glazed buns, Chelsea buns, Bath

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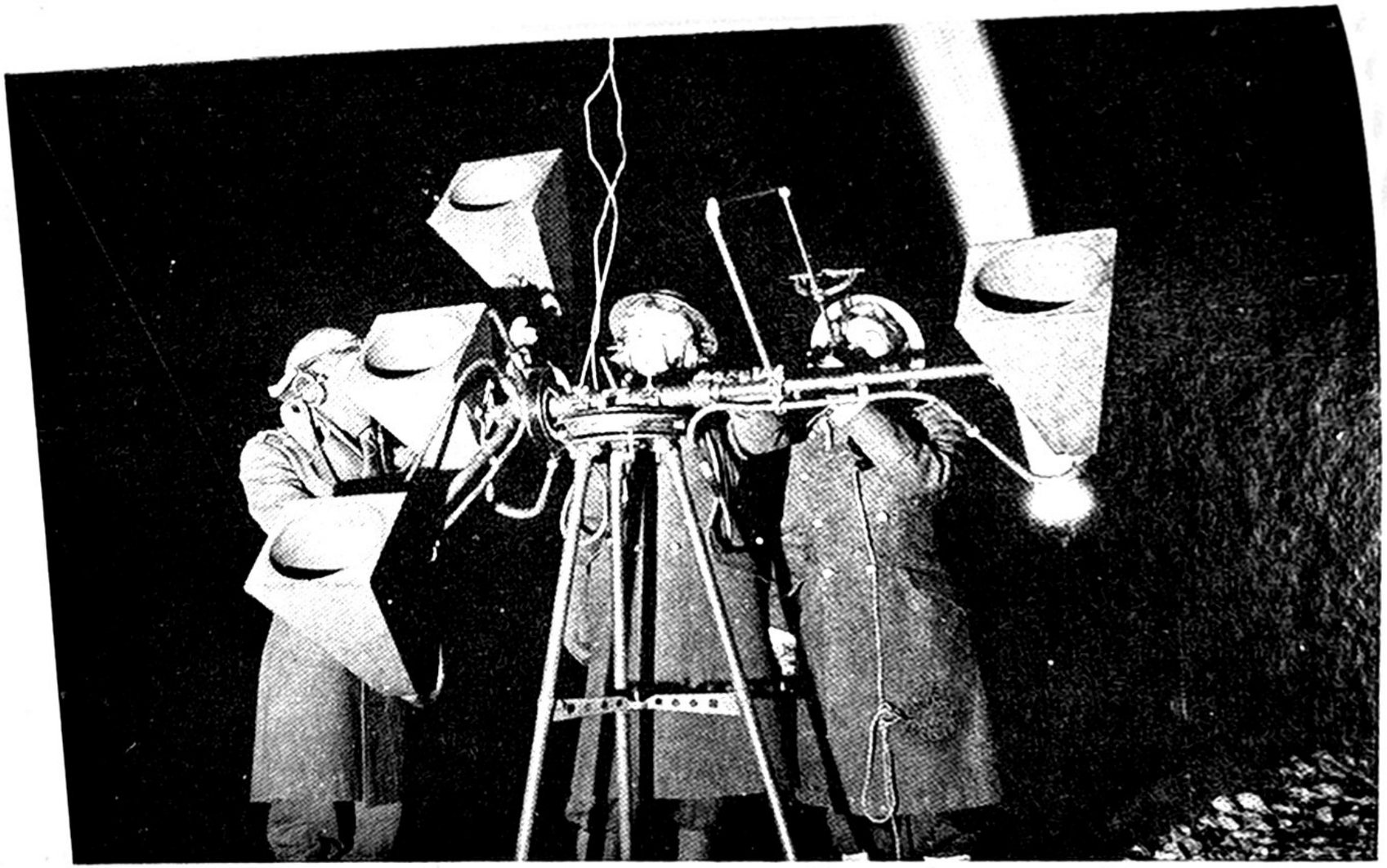

At work on sound detection. [*British Official Photo.*

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Plotters at Command Post. [*British Official Photo.*

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buns . . . an Arabian Night's Dream of buns. Perspiring but happy the class were regarding their handiwork, but the sergeant-major was in critical humour.

"Bah !" he poked a finger at a tray, "that lot's heavy, and the Chelsea's have got too much syrup on them, and that other lot hasn't risen enough. Haven't I *told* you Army bun dough is the thing we're proudest of in the Service ? Don't you *know* there's nothing you can't do with it provided you treat it right ? And then you go and murder it like that ! Listen to me, "*Never put your bun dough where you wouldn't put your baby* !" It's all in the temperature, I tell you, when you put it to set, and if you think. . . ."

But the class knew and cherished the sergeant-major's slogan. As one man they bawled at him, "*Never put your bun dough where you wouldn't put your baby* !"

IV

During my peregrinations round the school, girl after girl had asked me, " Have you seen *our* room ?" or "Have you seen the German room ?"

Mystified, I demanded the answer from the Junior Commander. "What on earth do they mean ?"

"Ah, I'll get the keys and show you."

"Our" room proved to be a large apartment which had been entirely arranged by the instructor who was an artist as well as a confectioner. On wide ledges running round it was an exact replica of our invasion of the Continent from the landings on the Normandy beaches right the way through Northern France. Here were the tanks going ashore, the ducks, the jeeps, the guns, the soldiers. There were the prefabricated harbours. Here were the poplar-bordered roads of France. There was a model field-kitchen complete to the last detail. And above each stage of invasion were stacked samples of the foods with which our men were supplied, from compo

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packs of all sizes to the tins of soup heated by inserting a lighted cigarette end into a little hole and the parachute food-packs such as were dropped to the men of Arnhem.

The centre of the room was occupied by an immense table on which stood a sample of each article of domestic equipment the British soldier needs. Until I studied that table I had no least idea of the immense variety of things necessary if an Army is to be well fed. Cookers of all descriptions, from tiny things to large ones ; cauldrons and pots of all shapes and sizes, kettles and brushes and brooms and cleansing materials . . . the list seemed endless.

"The Auxiliaries love coming up here," said the Junior Commander. "They nearly all have husbands, brothers, fathers, sweethearts or boy-friends over there and this gives them a picture of how they are living. And look," she led me to a far corner, " here is a model of the African desert campaign with appropriate foods, and over there is one of the Italian campaign."

I poked about that room a long time and thought what an excellent idea had been the artist-confectioner's. Cooking for a unit of A.T.S. in this country without perhaps hope of ever cooking for a unit of soldiers overseas might be a dull job at times : an hour spent in this room would provide a fillip to any Auxiliary in moments of depression.

Then I remembered something, "But what did they mean by the *German* room ?"

"Ah, that's our star turn ! The British captured our opposite number, the German Army School of Cookery, in Brussels, and sent it over here for our experts to study."

So we walked along a passage—and entered Germany.

German nutrition charts covered the walls, German food samples covered the wide ledges, German compo packs were stacked behind them, German pamphlets loaded the central table. With characteristic thoroughness each exhibit was accompanied with a detailed description of when, why, where and how it should be used and a harsh injunction to study pamphlet number so-

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and-so on the particular subject. There were samples of German bread galore (all fashioned out of plaster and very well done too); samples of more varieties of dried peas and beans than I had known existed; samples of different flavourings; gaily coloured posters of fish with their individual nutrition value given beneath each and even minute instructions such as, "Eat herring in May; they are at their best then"; little squares of dehydrated cabbage (red and white), meat, potatoes and various other articles; more samples which might have been anything but were labelled with high-sounding names to which probably they lived up, for there was mighty little which was *ersatz* in that room except the coffee.

"Our experts say the standard is high all round," said the Junior Commander.

"Yes, their soldiers will be the last to suffer, not from humane reasons but . . ." I paused before a tiled kitchen cabinet which was decorated with a vast assortment of pink and smoked hams, lots of sausages and a selection of cheeses. "But those are *real*?"

"Don't bet on it! See that piece of rolled smoked ham covered with a cellophane wrapper? I lost money on that one. D'you see, it's got that faint bronzish tinge in the middle, just as you get when a slice has been cut off—but it's plaster and so is everything else in the cabinet."

The German who created those dummy eatables deserved full marks from his Fuehrer.

I moved to the centre table and read as much as I could understand of the printing on the pamphlet covers. Written in a hectoring style they yet gave the German soldier an immense amount of valuable knowledge concerning vitamins and calories and proteins. . . .

"We are having everything translated, so that the students can understand. They get a kick out of this room, you know. I think it makes them feel: 'Well, here are we doing a course safe and sound in *our* Army Cookery School and the Germans have lost theirs altogether.'"

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I'm afraid that if I got a kick it was a nasty one. That room gave me a queer sensation which it is difficult to explain. It made me feel the very spirit of Germany, and even when the Junior Commander locked its door behind us and we walked along the corridor the feeling persisted. It did not lift until we passed a recreation room and heard an Auxiliary singing, "*Never put your bun where you wouldn't put your baby* !"

V

But you will say, why write so much about the Army Cookery School ? I write about it because, quite apart from the value of the practical and theoretical training it gives Auxiliary cooks, it gives them something yet more important : the feeling that domestic service in the Army ranks as high as the most glamorous job offered by the Service. They return to their units full of confidence, full of determination to run their cookhouses with slick efficiency, and they are far better able to cope with all the snags which may arise.

It is no use minimising the difficulties the average A.T.S. cook has to face. Houses requisitioned as billets may be strangely unsuited in several ways. A stove which may be delightful when twelve people have to be catered for becomes a menace when you have to prepare hundreds of meals on it. A boiler which produces constant hot water for a family cannot be induced to provide anything but a lukewarm stream when scores of girls have to wash themselves, their undies and their stockings. Sculleries are too small with shallow sinks, coal-houses are in the most awkward places, larders are inadequate.

When the cookhouse is not in a house but in a hut problems are often intensified. I have seen cooks preparing the dinner with ground-sheets over their heads as protection against the drips coming through the hut roof,

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and I have seen them working with blue fingers because all the winds that blow are whistling through ill-fitting windows. When I hear soldiers reviling A.T.S. cookery or listen to fond mothers telling me "My son in the Army says the A.T.S. spoil all the food," I remember these things and wonder if anyone short of a magician could produce a tasty meal in such circumstances.

There are careless cooks and there are "sticky" units: on the whole I think the standard is admirable.

The Senior Commander who came round the Cookery School with me said, "It's a funny thing, but I've always found that the tougher the job the more my cooks try to master it. I was with Ack-Ack for two years, through the worst of the blitzes, and I shall never forget the behaviour of my cooks. Just as they finished washing up each evening the alert would sound. The only cover we had available for them were slit trenches—nasty damp things they were too, and in these they'd huddle while the raid was on, and it usually lasted nearly all night. It was jolly cold so they wrapped themselves in everything they possessed, from rugs to bed-socks. Sometimes when I went round to see them I could scarcely help laughing, they looked so comical with their tin hats perched on their heads and an amazing variety of gear on their bodies. When the all-clear went they were entitled—indeed, they were supposed to go to bed. But did they? Not a bit of it! When they thought things were quietening down they'd scramble out and nip back to the cookhouse so as to get coffee and cocoa and sandwiches ready for the men when they came off the gun-sites; then they'd start preparing a really good breakfast—and even that wasn't all. During the morning, if you walked around our camp, you kept meeting strings stretched across the paths with cardboard notices hung on them, 'Quiet, please! Men asleep.' They kept that up not for one night, or two, or three, but for weeks on end, and I'm blessed if I know to this day how they did it."

I asked her if the attitude towards cookery as a job had altered much since the Service first started recruiting

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girls for it.

"Gracious me, yes! There was a period when we didn't know where to turn for cooks. We had to beguile them and wheedle them and argue with them for hours to get them to enter the category at all. It's quite different now. Through the past three years there has been a gradual growth of interest in cookery. Sometimes, indeed, the lists are actually full up, although every day, of course, brings fresh demands for women cooks to replace men and release them for foreign service."

For myself I think that is perhaps the greatest achievement of the A.T.S.; to have given back to a great company of women a sense of pride in domestic service.

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CHAPTER V

THE UNSUNG

I

ASK any officer in the A.T.S. what category she thinks works the hardest and receives the least reward and she will reply without hesitation "the orderlies." Ask anybody outside the Service what category he or she thinks is the least interesting or onerous, and the answer comes "orderlies, I suppose. I mean, they just clean, and wash up and dust—jobs anybody could do. Probably they're unfitted for anything else."

It seems to me all wrong that because a girl is doing the job women have done throughout the centuries she should be looked down upon : it seems even worse that she should be regarded as a case of arrested development, for the truth is that the task of orderly in the A.T.S. is a stiff one which calls for concentration, tact, method and various other qualities not usually associated with half-wits.

There are seven kinds of orderly in the Service : hospital, house, medical, mess, office, telephone and miscellaneous duties—but let us take the three kinds which are the most ordinary, house, mess and miscellaneous duties.

The house orderly has the billets or huts where the girls live garnished and trim. She has to use a terrific amount of elbow grease on tables and floors ; she has to clear up after other people (for although all Auxiliaries do their own small jobs there is bound to be a lot of mud or dust left

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behind by perhaps a hundred girls); she has to see to the finishing touches which mean so much—the placing of a vase of flowers here or the straightening of a picture there. Not for her the excitement of working on the guns, the rushing to and fro for lectures or courses: she stays at home and "keeps house," a process which sometimes makes her wonder what good she is doing in the Service until it is explained to her that without her work the others would soon be in very poor shape indeed. As a result she generally becomes so house-proud that she thunders anathema at any colleague who doesn't wipe her feet on the door-mat.

The mess orderly gets all the kicks and none of the ha'pence. Apart from the dreary grind of washing up meal after meal she also serves the food—and if the least thing is wrong then she hears all about it. Curiously enough, so far as my observation went, this does not seem to lead to friction between the orderlies and the cooks; rather does it tend to create a bond between these sisters in adversity.

The miscellaneous orderly has perhaps the hardest job of all, for she is anybody's girl and her duties are legion. One moment she may be doing an urgent errand for a General and the next chasing up the reason behind non-delivery of the coal. Almost always she is in a hurry and she traverses endless corridors or camp roadways each day; but she prefers that to the occasional periods of inaction when she sits waiting to be called upon.

There are over 30,000 A.T.S. orderlies serving in this country alone and many of those are in the sub-categories described above. Perhaps they did not wish to become orderlies when they joined the Service; perhaps they dreamed of Ack-Ack or R.E.M.E., of transport driving or teleprinter operating—but orderlies were needed so orderlies they became, and to the general public they are practically unknown.

Inside the Service they have compensations. Their officers very genuinely appreciate their work (although some orderlies will tell you they don't say so quite often

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enough !) ; and if they prove bright at their job they stand an excellent chance of promotion—Field-Marshal Montgomery has an A.T.S. mess steward. They also have better hopes than several other categories of seeing overseas service and many of their number are now abroad, while others have waited the opportunity to transfer into different A.T.S. trades. Some have gone through pre-O.C.T.U. and O.C.T.U. and are now commissioned officers—useful ones too for they know all there is to know about billets and messing.

II

There is, believe it or not, a placidity about orderlies not met with elsewhere in the Service. I have found it particularly among house and messing orderlies, to whom I always make a point of talking when visiting any A.T.S. establishment.

"Don't you find your job monotonous ?" I asked one who was dusting diligently.

"No. I was a cotton operative before the war and this job is full of change after that one. Besides, I've learnt how to keep house and that's important for I've married since I've been in the Service, you see." She gave an extra hard rub with the duster and added, " There's going to be no dirt in my man's house !"

Another was not so cheerful. She thought housework was "menial" compared to her previous work as a factory hand.

"But that's an old, old story nobody believes nowadays surely ?"

"You'd believe it all right, ma'am, if you had to put up with the other girls. It's not what they say, it's the way they look at you—you know, sort of what's-the-cat-brought-in-now look. Mind, I like my job and the Junior Commander's always saying, 'Oh, cheer up, Brown, stop imagining things'; but it's *not* im-

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agination.''

I'm afraid a great deal of it was, although I admit the old social inferiority idea is hard a-dying ; but I watched that Auxiliary carefully and seldom saw her sad or depressed.

''It's just a 'thing,' '' the Junior Commander told me. ''I think some of her friends at home rather sneered at her and she brought this grievance back with her from leave about a year ago. She's a very good orderly, and time and again she's told me she's perfectly content except for these supposed looks from the others. I've got a new idea now. I'm bringing her to the front in our A.B.C.A. discussion groups.''

The idea proved a sound one. When I revisited the camp several months later that orderly had quite got rid of her inhibitions. Arguing with her fellows and finding she could hold her own with them had cured her.

As a rule, however, I found the orderlies very much to the forefront in all such projects as making and stuffing Christmas toys, doing needlework of all kinds, knitting everything from socks to jumpers, decorating black-out curtains to make them look gay and producing ideas for the improvement of their billets.

In my lecture-tours among A.T.S. units, too, I have discovered that the orderlies ask a remarkable amount of questions, rather sensible forthright ones about life in other countries. Probably because their jobs are in mess, house or office they seem particularly interested in the outside world, and certainly what you tell them stays in their minds. When I was going round a unit only the other day an orderly asked to speak to me and produced a grubby piece of paper.

''Please, ma'am, you came and talked to us about Russia five months ago at Brecon and I didn't get a chance to ask you all the questions I wanted to so I wrote them down and kept them.''

I studied the piece of paper. She wanted to know the price of stockings in Moscow, whether the Russians used coal or wood in their stoves, if Marshal Stalin had a

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family, and if I could give her a pattern for "valinki," the Russian felt boots.

Not a bad bag after five long months !

Without the orderlies the Service would be in sad plight, for they do the essential jobs without which food could not be served or billets lived in. As a small Scots girl said to me, "Why, ma'am, we're the ver-ry spinal column !"

And how right she was.

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CHAPTER IV

ACK-ACK

I

"D'YOU remember the Secretary of State for War's speech in the House on April 10th, 1941 ?" asked the Major.

"You mean about the A.T.S. coming under the Army Act ?"

"Right—but what special reasons did he give for that move ?"

"I don't remember."

He regarded me with pity. "You missed something important there. He said that Auxiliaries were already discharging certain functions connected with the Air Defences of this country and he went on to make this significant remark, 'The House should know that such work includes duties at searchlight and gun stations.' They'd been testing girls out for quite a little time then. I was one of the first to have girls posted to me, and I'm ashamed to say now that I didn't welcome the prospect of training them, thought they'd be a nuisance, thought they'd upset the Battery and all that. Well, I've had them two and a half years. I've seen them in action—we had some pretty good snorters in the way of blitzes here, you know, and I've seen them when we were all so stale and edgy we'd have given our ears for sight of a Jerry plane. I can't praise them too highly. And mind you we set a terrific standard here. Come along and I'll show you round. Nothing's laid on specially. Just an ordinary routine day."

The Major had the reputation of being a bit of a mar-

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tinet, tremendously keen on spit and polish. "Man's got a mania for paint and whitewash," another Battery Commander had said. "Place looks like a garden in spring. But I must say," he had added handsomely, "it makes for efficiency."

The Battery occupied a piece of high ground on the outskirts of one of England's largest provincial cities. To our left were the gun-sites, and even their grassy mounds looked as if they had been shorn with a lawn-mower: to our right lay the camp, row upon row of hutments which boasted clean curtains, green-painted window-ledges and flower borders outside. The paths between were edged with whitewashed stones and wherever there was a spare patch of ground orderly lines of vegetables sprouted.

"Of course, you're seeing it at its best this fine summer day. Still, it's not a bad achievement for this was all waste land. They used to tip the city's rubbish here. We'll go to call on the A.T.S. Subaltern first. She has a sleeping hut, but we had a change-over and are just in process of putting up her office hut. At the moment she holds court in this tent. Rather stuffy in the hot weather and got an air of the gipsy warned me—cross my hand with silver kind of touch, but it's quite a good make-shift."

The Subaltern was a serene small person and delighted with her temporary office. She sat behind one card-table stacked with papers and a clerk typed at another, while a big cupboard containing files completed the tent's furnishings. "Isn't it grand?" she inquired eagerly. "I wish the summer would last. I shan't take kindly to a hut after this."

"Aren't you a bit cramped?"

"Oh, *no*! It's quite simple with a little method, and we're rather hot on that, aren't we, sir?"

The Major grinned. "But you didn't think much of it when you arrived, did you, Andy? Well, see you later. We're doing a little tour."

Outside he said, "We're very proud of Andy. When

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she came first she jumped whenever I spoke to her, kept saying 'yes, sir,' 'no, sir,' like a parrot, trotted every little problem of her girls up to me. Then we had a talk. I explained she had her job and I had mine, and I held her entirely responsible for her Auxiliaries' work and moral welfare. If she had any really difficult situation to cope with she could bring it to me at once ; otherwise she must make decisions on her own. For a week or two she walked about looking as if she had all the cares in the world ; after that she began to perk up ; now she's marvellous with her girls."

He paused by an open window. "This is our Exhibit A, our showpiece. They're just swabbing the floor, so we won't disturb them, but have a peek through here."

I found myself looking at the cleanest kitchen I had ever seen. The pots, lids and ladles shone like mirrors ; the table was snowy white ; not a speck marred the freshly black-leaded surface of the stove. Two Auxiliaries in overalls were diligently mopping the concrete floor, and as they caught sight of their Commanding Officer's face they beamed.

"Just finishing off, sir."

He smiled back and moved on. "Neither of those girls had worked in a kitchen until they joined the Service. One was in a shop and the other in a factory. It was an effort on Andy's part to make them understand the value of cleanliness—now they're liable to throw a mop at anyone who defaces their precious kitchen."

Walking down the path leading to the butcher's domain I thought : the martinet story is legend. No girls ever smiled like that at an officer they feared.

In the butchery an enormous soldier was cutting and jointing a side of beef, while under his watchful eye an Auxiliary wielded a chopper on a neck of lamb.

"Careful now," he admonished in the accents of Tyneside. "Don't *hack* them, hinny. There's nothing worse than untidy chops. Puts the lads off their feed. She's new, sir," he explained, "and a wee bit nervous, but she'll shape grandly."

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The Auxiliary blushed and chopped with renewed vigour.

"Let me see," said the Major. "How many girls have you trained now ?"

"Seven, sir, and only one a bit backward. Three of them are tradesmen butchers now. I never thought it was work for a girl myself, but I've changed my mind."

Like the kitchen, the butcher's shop was spotless. Carcases dangled from their hooks, chopping blocks were newly scrubbed, fresh sawdust strewed the floor. (On future visits to the Battery I never could resist glancing into it and the kitchen, and whatever hour of the day it was I never saw them dirty or untidy.)

"Now we'll go over to the gun-sites," said the Major. "There's a practice on this afternoon. Naturally we're only too thankful there hasn't been a blitz lately ; but we're all apt to grow lazy and careless in these quiet periods and sometimes I think they are far more trying than our sudden blazes of action, especially for the A.T.S. They take their job frightfully seriously—we had some wonderful examples of their team-work in our dangerous days, and they don't suffer inactivity in the same easy way the men do."

From a distance I could see scores of girls in khaki battle-blouses and slacks scurrying to and fro among the gun-sites like so many ants. "Heard of rocket-guns, haven't you ? Here they are. They're simple enough to operate but you need to be mighty nippy on these little platforms, for the guns swing round—so, you see, and if you happen to be in the way then it's just too bad. That's another thing I find with the Auxiliaries. They *remember* caution better than the men. Give them a demonstration of danger once and they won't forget it however many times they have to do that particular job, whereas familiarity makes the men careless."

We paused beside two Auxiliaries who were crouching at a small doorway set in one of the grassy mounds.

"They're seeing the ammunition is all in order. They check it over once a week. Those others are cleaning and

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testing the guns.''

''It's strange work for girls to be doing, isn't it? I mean, they handle these lethal weapons so easily and their technical conversation sails far over my head.''

''I don't quite agree,'' said the Major slowly. ''I admit the cause of their being here, the war, is terrible; but war is here and we are in the middle of it and I think these young creatures feel they're really doing something worth while. I feel also that in the future they will be able to fight *against* war far more effectively than their mothers or grandmothers. They'll know the answers, you see. These girls have brought an enemy plane down, seen it hurtling through the sky. They've shared dangers, excitements, disappointments with their men-folk, they know exactly what war means. Their conversation is a bit technical at times, but listen to this.''

We halted by another couple squatting by an ammunition box. They were grease up to their elbows.

''Oh, not Walter Pidgeon, he looks too old. Give me Clark Gable every time. Oh, boy, he's lovely!''

''I like that George Raft myself. Nice and sinister. All the same, Pidgeon's my favourite. Golly—chuck over the grease-pot, will you?—that guy can *act*!''

''I say, 'The Man Who Came to Dinner' is on at the Plaza. D'you think we can make it on Thursday?''

''M'm, I've got a date, but I don't think much of him. Makes sheep's eyes and looks soft, *you* know. . . .''

Rather guiltily we retraced our steps without being seen.

'' 'Technical' I think you said?''

I followed him meekly to where an officer was shouting instructions to a mixed group of gunners and Auxiliaries.

''This is the usual drill for action stations. They have two minutes to get into position.''

As the Major spoke his junior drew out a stop-watch. ''Now then, I count three—and they're off! One . . . Two . . . Three. . . .''

There was a concerted rush for the gun-sites and for a moment the air seemed full of khaki-clad figures, but

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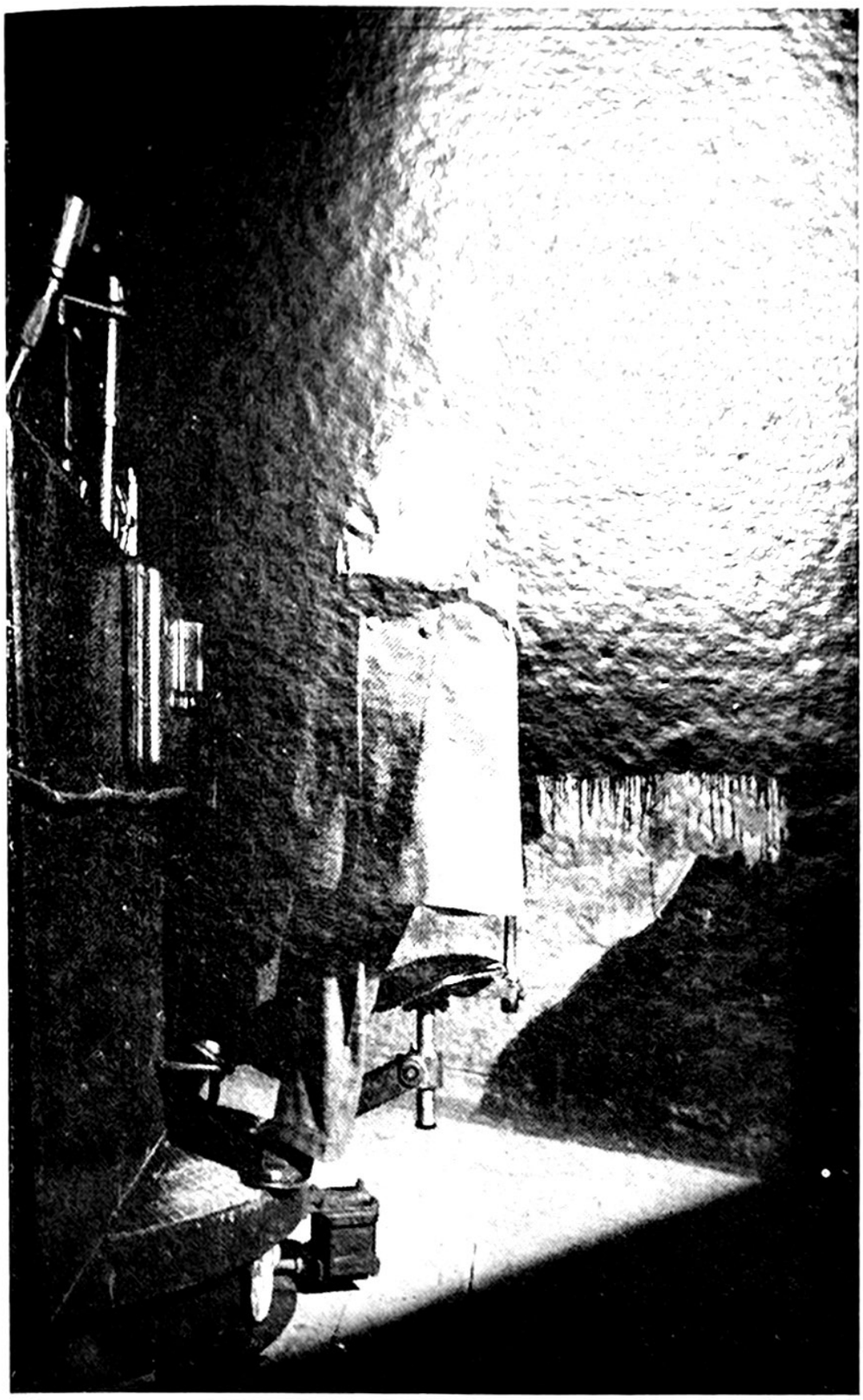

[*British Official Photo.*

Ack-ack night action stations.

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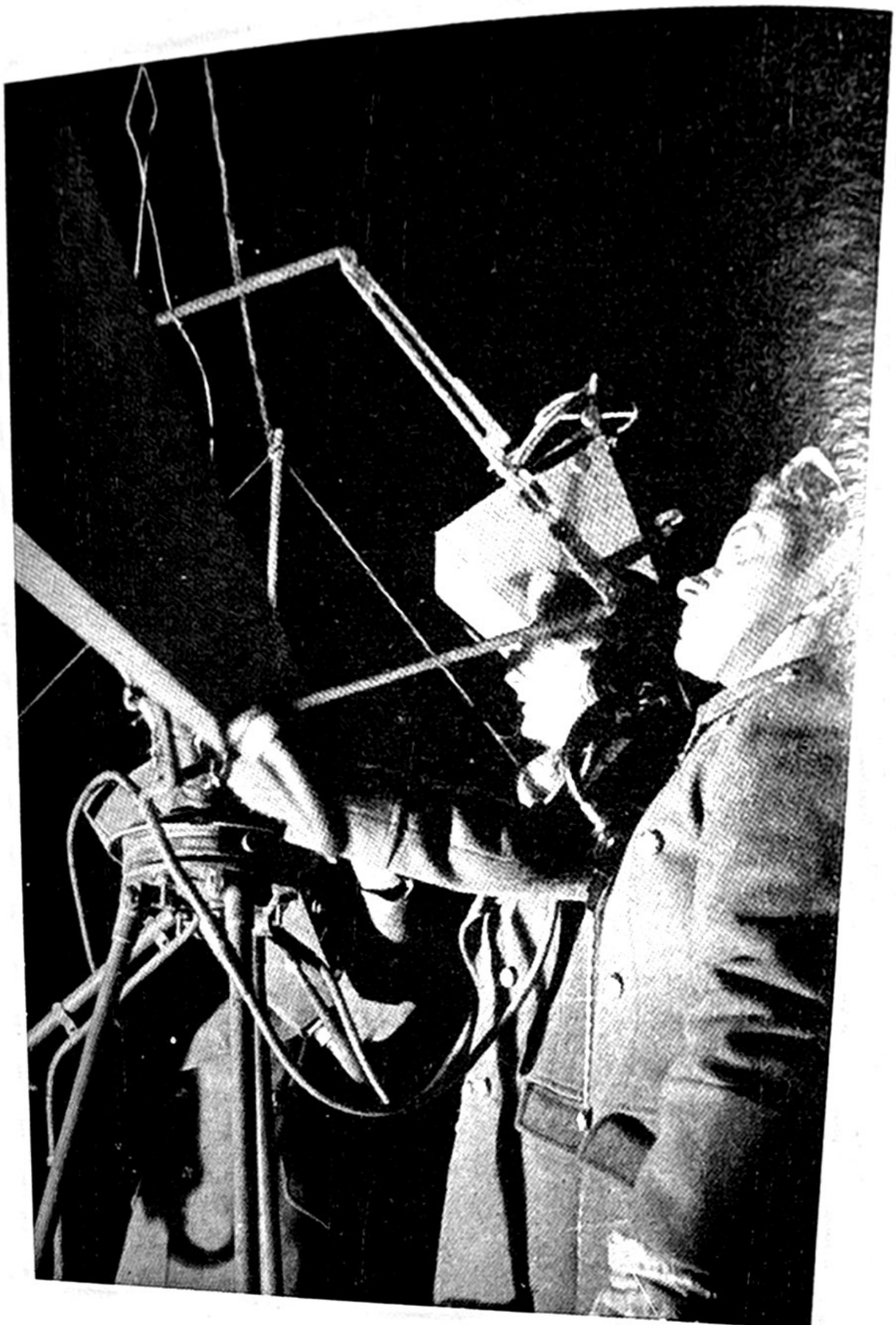

[*British Official Photo.*

Searchlight Officers in training.

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there was nothing aimless in their movements. Everyone seemed to know exactly where to make for and before I'd really *seen* the rush the figures were standing motionless at their appointed posts.

The young man with the stop-watch sighed contentedly. "Not so dusty, twenty seconds under time."

"And that," said the Major, "has to be done over and over and over again, even though everyone knows the drill off by heart. If we get slack and then there's a blitz—heaven help us! Now we'll go and see the Plotters and the Predictors. See where a stream runs through that dip? Well beyond, up on the hill, you see the barbed wire fencing and that comic-looking flat building? That's where they hang out, our brightest and best."

We made our way towards the stream, stopping to congratulate an Auxiliary who had won a cup at the Battery Annual Sports the previous week and to watch three girls who were working in the carpenter's shop on a new table for the Plotters' room.

"Could you wait a moment?" asked the Major. "There's a fellow I want a word with."

One Auxiliary told me she had been an assistant in a dress shop, the second that she had been in a pottery, the third that she worked for a tobacconist.

"And now you're carpenters! How d'you like it?"

They giggled. "Oh, well, ma'am," said one. "This isn't our real job, just a hobby in our spare time. The Major suggested we should have a kind of club on free afternoons and learn other people's jobs—I mean, jobs that might help us in Civvy Street afterwards. Ada's in the cookhouse, Joan's on Telescope Identification Instruments and I'm a Plotter."

"And that," said Ada, "is why we're doing this table. Miriam bribed us with seats for the new Bob Hope film. Still, it's fun, and the sergeant who teaches us is a wonder at his job."

Joan looked up from her planing. "It's queer how one changes one's opinions. I'm Army Class and I was furious when they hauled me into the A.T.S. I hated the

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Training Depot, and I couldn't get used to living with a whole lot of other girls, and honestly I did as little as I possibly could. When I was posted here I thought it was the end. The men teased me, and I couldn't understand my job properly. I thought I'd go potty my first two months. Then I kind of settled down and became interested—I really couldn't tell you why. Now, of course, I dread the day I'll be posted elsewhere."

"We loathed the C.O.," said Ada candidly. "Remember the green paint, Joan? You see, paint's the breath of life to that man. It wasn't to me. He set us painting window-sills and I got painter's colic, and anyway, I never could make even strokes with the brush. Oh, he was a terror! You'd no sooner slip around the corner for a quiet smoke than down he'd come on you like a ton of bricks. But somehow when you saw the camp looking so clean and kind of shiny you began to take a pride in it, and then when he dragged you into all his sports and competitions and things you found yourself enjoying them against your will. This club of his, it's a grand idea. Look, here's our list of members."

It was a long list. Apparently, belonging to the club showed a mark of distinction. Its members were roughly fifty per cent. men, fifty per cent. women: gunners, cooks, predictors, radiolocation operators, orderlies, instrument operators, carpenters, plotters and people belonging to various other categories. It had been running for almost six months, and through it people could learn a remarkable variety of useful things. A certain amount of time in working hours was devoted to its activities, and as I studied the rules which one of the Auxiliaries handed me I took my hat off to the Major, for the prime enemy of all Ack-Ack Batteries during periods of quietness is boredom, and here—presto!—was its cure.

"See this doll's house?" said Miriam. "The butcher's made it for his little girl's birthday, and one of our orderlies made this bookshelf, and another girl's trying her hand at a chair."

The Major returned. Reluctantly I left the carpenter's

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shop to continue our walk, but near the stream he stopped and pointed with his cane. "Like to have a look at the livestock ?"

We crossed to a large patch of field surrounded by netting. Inside it gambolled the strangest selection of dogs. One was indubitably a red setter, but the rest were near-terriers, near-spaniels . . . near somethings.

The Major was a great believer in the canine race. "Makes the men and girls happy if they're allowed to keep dogs. Most of these are strays which wandered into the camp because they sniffed the cookhouse, but their owners wouldn't change them for the best the Kennel Club could offer. We had a competition last month for the ugliest one—that little fellow with the Irish terrier head and the Sealyham legs won it. The trouble was they were all over the place, these animals. You couldn't take a step without tripping over one—and their habits weren't of the most charming. When I said they must all be kept in this run during working hours a moan went up to high heaven ; but they've come round to the idea now. The Auxiliaries—five of them—take it in turn to do kennel-maid, and the owners all take their pets out in the evenings."

Near the "kennels" was the hen-run, and as we walked up to the wire we saw an Auxiliary, rear-view, bending above a row of nests.

"How many today ?" called the Major.

She turned and held up a basket full of eggs. "Twenty-two, sir," she said proudly.

"Good!" He added as we turned away, "You mightn't believe it, but that child was scared stiff of hens a few months ago. Now, if you miss her off duty, you know where to find her—in the hen-run."

In the funny squat building on the hill-top I was introduced to the girls working on the Telescope Identification Instruments, the Height and Range Finders and the Predictors, to the Plotters and Radiolocation Operators. They identified planes, friendly or enemy, plotted the course of the enemy aircraft, located targets and passed

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much vital information, including directions for gun-fire, down to the gun-sites by telephone.

They lived in a remote little world of their own, these girls and their soldier companions. No planes droned through the clear summer sky, but the Plotters were busy on their table or working with the wall-charts; the Telephonists sat at their switchboards with ear-phones on; the various Instrument Operators bent over their apparatus. It wasn't an act laid on for our benefit; they did this all day and every day—or all night and every night, alert and watchful lest the enemy should arrive.

I looked around. Jam jars full of wild flowers decorated the plotting-hut, the tiny mess-room, even the hut which served as the A.T.S. cloak-room. Somebody had stencilled a border of gay flowers across a wall; somebody else had planted a row of cypresses as a wind-break outside the huts. I wandered to the window and gazed down at the pall of smoke which hid the nearby city. In it men and women were working in war factories of all descriptions, but when that work was finished they could scurry out into busy streets, go and have a pint at the local, look at the shops or visit the pictures—and if the sirens sounded they could pop into a shelter. Up on this isolated hill-top a handful of men and women also worked, but beer and shops and pictures were far away—and if the sirens sounded their job was intensified.

The curious part was they seemed happy—or was it curious? As the Major had said, they were right *in* the war. They knew the answers.

"You're staring rather wistfully at that small concrete building. Sorry, we can't take you in there. That's our very hush-hush compartment where the Radiolocation people do their stuff."

I hadn't even noticed the building. I had been too busy thinking of other things; of the monotony of life on the hill-top, of the constant strain of watching and waiting, of the cut-off-from-life feeling people must experience up here. On the way back to the camp I tried to explain my rather muddled thoughts to the Major.

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"Ah, that's why we have all our comic clubs and things. You've got to get the community feeling into a Battery, otherwise you'll have people scratching each others' faces just because they're so sick of seeing them. We have romances too, you know, they're a great help. At the moment everyone's agog over a budding affair between the carpenter and one of the A.T.S. cooks. In my selfish moments I hope it will peter out, for I don't want to lose either of them."

"Why should you have to lose them ?"

"Orders. No husband and wife can be employed in the same establishment. It sounds hard, but it's a good rule."

Near the "kennels" rapturous reunions between owners and dogs were taking place. Further up the field a mixed cricket-match was in progress and beside the cookhouse four Auxiliaries were playing badminton.

"Work is over for the day now ?"

"Except for those on night-shift, yes." The Major added gently, "Work is *never* over in a Battery."

II

The Battery just described was in the heart of England, near to a great city and a vast industrial area ; but my Ack-Ack visits took me to many isolated Batteries, both large and small, where it was even more necessary that Auxiliaries and gunners should make their own amusements, their own hobbies, their own philosophy of living. Most of the girls I met came from homes in towns. They were used to working in busy offices, shops or factories, to home life, to bustling crowds, to a cinema or dance-hall just around the corner. Now they were stationed in the Orkneys or on the Pembroke coast ; on a cliff-top overlooking an angry sea or on a moor where curlews cried plaintively. They lived under canvas or in Nissen huts ; they were subjected to all the rigours this

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many-sided climate can provide; they had to plough through ankle-deep mud and slither on duck-boards and suffer the lash of wind and the sting of rain.

Amazingly they were happy. They groused, of course, and spoke of their surroundings in anything but complimentary terms; but they had my admiration, for they built out of nothing new interests to replace those they had lost.

Sceptics will put their contentment with their new lot down to two reasons: the adaptability of youth and the fact that they were physically fitter than they had ever been before. Undoubtedly those things counted for a lot, but I prefer to believe the reason went deeper than that. I believe that almost without their knowledge the Auxiliaries were becoming philosphers because they were living as human beings were intended to live, close to the earth.

The very simplicity of their existence made them tremendously keen on the smallest pleasures. I remember a party of A.T.S. running like hares to catch the only bus which could take them to a small town twelve miles away where the cinema had its bi-weekly opening and the film showing was "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." They had all seen it in what was to them the dim and distant past, but that did not lessen their enthusiasm in the slightest.

I noticed over and over again, too, how the girls' interest in their fellow-men was growing. To begin with an Auxiliary would have the average townswoman's slight contempt for country folk; within a month or two of her arrival on a lonely station she would be full of praise for rural kindness. As a Londoner said to me, "When I came up to the north of Scotland I thought I was coming to the end of the world. They told me I'd have to have forty-eight hours' leave to go to the pictures and they were just about right, but the funny thing is I don't mind a bit now. The people are so *kind* to us. The old farmer and his wife over the hill hold open house for us in our free time—and can she make scones! And he teaches us sword-

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dancing in the kitchen of an evening. Honestly, I never enjoyed myself so much.''

At another Battery a group of A.T.S. trekked solemnly in the wake of the local gamekeeper learning the habits of birds, and at a third dart matches at the pub were the fashion.

Sometimes, I admit, they found relaxation in rather peculiar ways. On a lonely stretch of sand by Cardigan Bay I met an Auxiliary wandering along kicking up the sand with her toes. She wasn't ''palely loitering,'' however, for she was singing in a lusty though untuneful voice :

''Mares eat oats and does eat oats
And little lambs eat ivy.
Kids'll eat ivy too—and do. . . .''

The month was November, and patches of mist drifted across the grey sea. I ventured the remark that it wasn't exactly the weather for a stroll along the shore.

''Och, but it's worth it, ma'am. Coal's so awful scarce we take it in turns to come down and collect driftwood. I'm awful unlucky the morning but I'll find some yet ! It's a grand game. There's ten of us in it and the one who gets the most wood wins a prize—twenty Woodbines and a month's sweetie ration. Besides, I like the sea fine. I come from Glasgow, you see, and I kind of missed the Clyde—we used to go 'doon the water' for our holidays to Dunoon.''

''You're a long way from home ?''

''Aye, and this Battery's awful dull. We never see a Jerry. I was in a Battery near 'The Broch' (Fraserburgh) before, and my, we saw life there ! Raids nearly every night and bombs dropping all round. When I went home on leave my mother said, 'Were ye no' scared, Jeannie ?' 'Scared ?' says I, 'what way would I be scared when I'm behind the guns ?' Och, there's a fine bit !'' She made a sudden dive and tugged a long spar of wood out of the sand.

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the mess. "Odd pleasures your girls find. I've just been hearing about the driftwood competition."

The Junior Commander smiled. "Oh, yes, that's a good effort and we're grateful for it." She nodded towards the fireplace where a wood fire gave out darts of blue and red flame. "But if you looked after catering as I do you'd prefer the Noble Army of Egg Scroungers. They spend their free time blandishing the neighbouring farmers with miraculous results. We have all manner of activities here, from birds'-nesting to doll-making. You see, our nearest town is twenty-five miles, and when you get there it's not very exhilarating. We try to have as many E.N.S.A. and S.E.M.A. shows as possible; but we're a small unit so have to wait our turn. Honestly, I think the girls enjoy their own amusements better than anything from outside. At the moment they're rehearsing 'Uncle Vanya,' with a very tough sergeant-major as the Doctor. It ought to be worth seeing."

"Surely Tchekov is flying a bit high?"

"You might think so, but I've found through experience of mixed Batteries that the average Auxiliary or gunner really prefers good drama, music or art to rubbish. That is, provided he or she isn't pushed up to it and told to admire it. If you leave them alone and just throw in a hint occasionally when appealed to you'll find they'll automatically go for decent stuff. Oh, dear, I must go round the messes and receive bricks about the meat."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing—if we'd had time to thaw it properly. It's that compressed boneless beef and it needs careful treatment for it's apt to taste like biltong if it doesn't have careful thawing. Funny part is, the Auxiliaries don't complain so much about the toughness; what they object to is the absence of bones."

I sat looking out of the window at the bleak landscape, wondering if I could ever endure life in this tiny huddle of huts perched above the bay. Presently my friend of the morning hove into sight, dragging behind her a great pile of driftwood lashed together with a rope. As she passed

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the window I heard,

"... And little lambs eat ivy.
Kiddletivy too—and do. ..."

Somehow I felt she was well in the running for the Woodbines and the sweeties.

III

In an experimental gunnery Depot in eastern England you will find a young A.T.S. Subaltern who wears a red cap-band. She is the only woman in the Service entitled to this emblem of the Gunnery Instructor, and she and her detachment are among the pioneers of a certain branch of Ack-Ack work seldom heard of by the public.

They are Kinetheodolite Operators, and when their strange instrument was first produced in 1939 precious few people outside the Army and only one or two in it knew how to work the thing. It was a combination of camera, telescope and theodolite, and its function was to photograph moving targets and shell-bursts in the sky. Its potential contribution to the success of our Ack-Ack defences was calculated to be enormous, but it had never been fully tested in this country and a great handicap was that practically nobody understood its workings.

Consequently a picked group of A.T.S. were chosen to master its intricacies under the guidance of Army scientists. They were not all trained mathematicians by any means, although they had to show a certain standard in and keenness for that subject as their training included lectures in such fearsome matters as optics, trigonometry and electricity. It was not surprising that many of the girls failed in their examinations. The surprising part was that those who passed went on to learn how to develop the photographs they had taken, and how to calculate the results by trigonometry and logarithms.

By 1942 the Kine theodolite Operators were working at

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several heavy Ack-Ack Practice Camps, where they used their instrument to determine the accuracy of the gunnery pupils' aim; while at the Experimental Gunnery Depot the scope of their work had grown tremendously.

The "K.T.'s," as they are called, test every new piece of Ack-Ack equipment, from a gun down to a tiny gadget, and the members who work in conjunction with Army scientists have won for themselves an affectionate nickname, "the Brains Trust." These girls know a very great deal of our secret weapons against the Luftwaffe and take an immense pride in their skilled and difficult job; but to meet they are extraordinarily simple and unaffected.

Indeed, having watched them at work, I found it hard to believe they were the same girls who argued violently over the tea-cups about whether So-and-So should have her hair done in curls or not. I should have fallen down trying to learn even a fraction of their knowledge, but the fact that they knew how to set up and dismantle a kine-theodolite instrument; how to load the film, bring the instrument into action and pick up and follow the target; how to unload and develop the film; how to evaluate it, read angles and make corrections; finally how to compute and work out the results, seemed to sit lightly upon them.

"It's just a job," said one.

It may have been—to her: to me it was little short of magic. "That girl who was reading angles at terrific speed: what did she do before the war?"

"Training as an art student."

"And the other who was such a wizard at trigonometry?"

"Oh, she was a County Council Debt Collector."

I didn't ask any more. I crawled away feeling old and very, very humble.

IV

"The road goes like this," said the Education Officer,

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scribbling briskly at a little map. "You get off the bus at this bend marked X, where an A.T.S. sergeant will meet you and take you up to the searchlight site."

It was a day of howling wind which brought with it great gusts of sleet, and from my vantage point on the bus-top I spied the sergeant a long way away, a small figure in mackintosh and wellington boots. Over her arm hung an anti-gas cape and from one hand dangled a second pair of boots.

"I brought these for you," she greeted me. "It's rather rough going. I hope the boots will fit?"

My feet are large, but those boots were fashioned for a giantess—I put them on over my own shoes and still had to shuffle lest I lost one. Swathed in the anti-gas cape, I set forth with the sergeant across a species of peat-bog.

"There *is* a path in the summer, but it's mostly under water this time of the year. Have you ever been to a searchlight site before?"

"No."

"Oh, you'll like it! I was in an Ack-Ack Battery before, but a searchlight site's much better—more exclusive. And then we're all A.T.S. here so we feel we're really doing the entire job on our own. We're all volunteers for the work, you know, and the Authorities are very decent. They do try to post friends to the same site."

I looked at the lowering sky, the squelching peat-bog, the utter desolation of the scene. "Why volunteer?"

The sergeant turned a shocked face. "But it's a grand life! I wouldn't change it for anything!"

With difficulty I extricated my right boot from the bog which clung to it like bird-lime. "Seems a bit grim to me."

"Well, the walk to the bus-stop is a bit awkward, but we only do it about once a week, if that. Wait until you see our camp, it's marvellous!"

The camp consisted of the searchlights and their equipment and a few dejected small huts. Inside these, however, things were warm and cheerful. Big fires crackled in the stoves, several easy chairs looked inviting,

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pictures hung on the walls, and potted ferns fringed the window-sills.

"And we've got home-made toasted buns for tea," said the sergeant. "Our cook's a wonder, you must meet her. We were at school together, back home."

The tea was excellent. While we demolished it she told me of her training for this job.

"They experimented secretly with A.T.S. on search-lights in 1941, first to see if we were capable of doing the different jobs; then to test whether the conditions would get us down or be bad for our health. Everything was O.K., so they set up training schools and called for volunteers. There were plenty of those, I can tell you! It's rather interesting how many of them had their homes in places which had been blitzed—I think they sort of wanted to have a crack back at Jerry. Of course, all volunteers had to pass a very strict medical, and also to prove they were quick-witted and up to the job."

"How long was your training"?

"Four months—and then there were extras. You see, N.C.O.s not only have to train detachment commanders and assistants, but they have also to learn each particular operational job, so that they know all the work the girls under them are doing. I spent a month in training camp, then for a fortnight I was deployed to sites for both day and night practice runs. That was followed by a second month of camp training, and last of all I lived on a site for a fortnight to get experience of active service conditions. This site," she waved a hand round the hut, "is heaven compared to the training conditions. There we had to learn to rough it in case of necessity. As well as our own work, we cooked and cleaned and did all kinds of things. We had very little heating, and as for the icy cold water we had to wash in—ugh!"

"And still you wouldn't change?"

"Rather not! D'you know, we were actually in action during an alert only a few days after we finished our training? We've got a grand lot of girls here, too. They all get on so well together."

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After tea she took me round the site in the failing light. Dismal as the surroundings were, all the Auxiliaries were astonishingly cheerful and all their equipment was in apple-pie order.

"It's like an oasis in the desert," I said.

"What a lovely name for the site!" exclaimed an Auxiliary. "Oh, Sarge, do let's call ourselves 'Oasis'."

Not only other ranks, but officers as well have to put in a period of stiff training for searchlight operations. They too must learn how to clean searchlight projectors and equipment, how to work and repair both lights and generators. They must study the mysteries of the rudiments of electricity, learn to recognise enemy aircraft, and practise riding a motor-cycle under any kind of conditions. Furthermore, they must possess detailed knowledge of how their Auxiliaries live, so when they have finished actual training they go, eight or so at a time, to man an isolated site entirely alone. A male warrant officer is in charge of the technical side, but the A.T.S. officers have to scrub, light fires, clean huts, cook, and generally "do" for themselves for six weeks. (Rumour has it that they also cook, scrub and so forth for the warrant officer as well, perhaps with an idea of softening his heart when it comes to the judging of work tests.)

On the particular site I visited the cook was a real character. Yorkshire-born, she had a sturdy dislike of what she termed, "that rubbish in tins," and a fierce determination to feed the Auxiliaries so heartily that they positively rolled to the site after a meal.

"But how d'you manage without tins in a remote spot like this?" I asked.

"Fine. We draw our rations from the Supply people at X every week. The R.A.S.C. men bring it—and they don't half carry on about that little bit of a walk from the main road. The first time I unpacked the stores there were tins of this and tins of that, so I just stacked them up in a corner, and next week I told them they could take all that nonsense back. As for bread—how can you expect the lasses to eat stale stuff that's been here nearly a week?

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And there's no goodness in that bakery stuff, either. 'Don't you bother staggering along with loads of bread for me,' I told the R.A.S.C. corporal. 'You bring me a sack of decent flour and some yeast, instead.' It took a fair time to knock it into his head, but he's learnt now. As for storing things that might go bad, if you've been brought up in the country like me you know a trick or two. See this big galvanised bin? It's a grand refrigerator. In the hot weather—that was three days this last summer—I put all perishable food and milk inside it, and keep it in the stream out at the back.''

''She catches fish there, too,'' put in the sergeant.

The cook regarded her severely. ''Tickle them, you mean. I'd make a rare poacher, if I took to it seriously. You'll have your supper before you go, ma'am? It's a real good hot-pot.''

Feeling slightly distended, I drew on my seven-league boots about eight p.m., and followed the sergeant and a bobbing lantern across the bog. The wind had dropped and a crescent moon shivered in the sky.

The sergeant studied the sky with a practised eye, and sniffed appreciatively. ''Fine weather to-morrow, thank goodness. If we've got time we must cut some peat and stack it. It helps out with the coal and has such a lovely smell.''

Behind her I thought that if the Ack-Ack girls had achieved a certain philosophy, the searchlight detachments had assuredly solved the art of living.

''Don't you miss the bright lights and so on?''

She shook her head in the moonlight. ''Not a bit. In fact, it's the other way. When I go home on leave, I feel kind of stifled in a city. When this lot's over, it's me for the wide open spaces.''

On the road, I handed over my borrowed gear, and thanked her for her kindness. Swinging myself on to the bus-step, I remembered something, and called out to her: ''I say, I really do think 'Oasis' is the right name.''

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CHAPTER V

"THE BRIGHT EYES OF DANGER"

I

ACK-ACK Battery Commanders have many stories to tell of the courage and coolness of the A.T.S. on the gun-sites during periods of danger. They have other stories, equally heroic, which may not be told until the war is won, but of those already known there is none finer than that of Lance-corporal Grace Catherine Golland, now serving with our Liberation Armies in Europe.

Grace Golland joined the A.T.S. about the middle of 1942. She was previously, like so many other recruits, a shop-assistant, and her home was in the sadly blitzed town of Coventry. By January, 1944, she had become leader of a detachment of instrument operators on an Ack-Ack gun site in the outer London defences, and had seen a considerable amount of active service, as the batteries with which she served had done a lot of good work in bringing down enemy aircraft.

On January 29th there was a night raid, and the battery went into action against the enemy bombers flying up the Thames estuary to attack London. As usual, Lance-corporal Golland and the five members of her detachment were in the instrument cabin, busily putting the guns and other instruments on target. Suddenly, one of the raiders dropped a canister of incendiaries on and near the gun-site, and followed it up with H.E. bombs.

Lance-corporal Golland's own account of the happen-

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ing and its aftermath is direct, almost casual.

"We heard something coming down, but were too busy to take much notice. The tactical control officer in the control room telephoned through to say that the bombs had fallen near us, and were we all right. I acknowledged this, and just then picked up a fresh target. We gave the range, and the guns started again. By this time it was getting very hot, and the smoke and fumes made it uncomfortable. We were lucky not to get a direct hit, and carried on. When the order to 'Stand Down' came through, I found that the fires were still burning."

For her gallantry, Lance-corporal Golland was awarded the British Empire Medal, the official citation in the *London Gazette* reading :—

> "By her courageous behaviour in danger and consistent and unsparing devotion to duty, she has set an inspiring example to all ranks. On January 29th, 1944, when performing her gun-site duties, she was engulfed by smoke and flame from some I.B.s which landed close to her, accompanied by H.E. bombs which killed cattle in the next field. Despite the concussion from bombs and the heat and fumes engendered by the incendiaries, Lance-corporal Golland remained at her post, and by her coolness and leadership enabled her team to maintain their duties, thereby allowing the site to fire in further engagements in a period of fifty-seven minutes."

Compare the official citation with Lance-corporal Golland's diffidently worded statement, and you get some idea of the character and pluck of this girl of twenty-three years old.

Now she is overseas, and with her are other Auxiliaries, many of them who have displayed similar courage and devotion to duty. Surely these Ack-Ack girls deserve undying praise ?

II

Ask the R.A. officers in charge of the plotting-rooms on the South Coast before the liberation of Calais and

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Boulogne what they think of their A.T.S. plotters, and they will pin you down in a corner and talk steadily at you for hours.

"Keen as mustard on their job," said one. "Those girls just live for the time when they are in action."

He spoke no more than the truth. Long before D Day, shifts of A.T.S. manned those front-line plotting rooms twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four, their job being to chart the course of every ship, Allied or enemy, passing our shores within a certain area. In addition, they must keep constant check on enemy aircraft, and pass on any information to the Ack-Ack batteries.

The plotters sit around a large table, each wearing a telephone set with headphones and a fixed mouthpiece, so that both hands are left free. Against one wall are the A.T.S. switchboard operators, and the moment they receive news of any enemy activity the plotting-room becomes a positive hive of industry. "Hive" is the word, for there is no rush or panic, the Auxiliaries work as methodically and quietly as bees. As each important piece of information comes through, so they chart out the enemy's course and work out his speed, while some of their number simultaneously pass on the bearings and range to coastal gun-sites.

These were the girls who plotted the course of the *Scharnhorst*, the *Gneisenau* and the *Prinz Eugen*—and mighty proud they are of that achievement. They also plotted the course of the S.S. *Munsterland* throughout her two hours' run before the coastal artillery finally sank her. So pleased were they with this effort that they keep the tracing as an "exhibit," together with some shell splinters sent them in gratitude by a coast regiment who were enabled, by their work behind the scenes, to engage the enemy.

"You've got to keep on your tiptoes at our job," said one of them. "But, luckily, there's no chance of getting stale, for every week we have 'quizzes' which deal with all branches of coastal artillery work."

"Yes," said another, "and we keep up with the men

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who man the guns. We attend gunnery lectures, to learn just how much they depend on us for their speed and accuracy. It's fascinating to find out how much help we *do* give them—makes you feel much better about things when you've got a fit of the blues.''

''I like the weekly 'speed plots' best,'' said a third. ''You see, the instructors give us details of the course of a mythical ship, and we have races as to who can plot her course the quickest.''

What the girls did *not* say was that more often than not they had worked to the accompaniment of the whine, scream and bang of German long-distance shells fired from the French coast. The plotting-room might rock and the earth tremble, hell might be let loose not far above their heads—but the work went on steadily, surely.

''You had some pretty hot times, didn't you ?''

''Oh, well,'' they smiled, deprecatingly, ''it's a whole lot quieter now.''

They were calm and self-possessed, and they interested me a great deal. One of them, who has since been posted elsewhere, has been mentioned in despatches for gallantry. She was wounded by a bomb which fell only five yards away from her during a coastal raid ; but she merely picked herself up, and ran to the aid of a badly wounded Naval officer and his wife, who were near her, and saw them safely to hospital. It was the kind of action, somehow, that you expected from a South Coast plotter.

You found another thing you expected : most of these Auxiliaries had the sea in their blood. This girl came from Holy Island, that one from a Cornish coastal village : this one's father and grandfather had been sailors, that one's brothers were in the Navy, and if some of them didn't hail from seafaring families, you discovered that they were married to sailors.

Nowadays they complain a trifle about the ''dullness'' of the plotting room ! Years of danger in ''Hell-Fire Corner'' and similar places have given them rather a high standard.

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III

Since the V1's were sent to try us, hundreds of Ack-Ack Auxiliaries have done fine work under most dangerous conditions—and also under very depressing physical ones. Hurried off to some new gun-site in order to combat this fresh menace, the girls often lived under canvas and had to put up with many minor hardships as well as with the big risk of a direct hit.

"Oh, but it was worth it," they said, enthusiastically. "The kick we got when we brought one down !"

It was a kick many people could have well done without ; but I honestly believe the A.T.S. enjoyed it.

And not only the Ack-Ack girls saw "the bright eyes of danger" when the flying bomb attack was at its height.

At a central ordnance depot in Southern England, where great quantities of M.T. stores lay in readiness to be sent to the British Liberation Armies in Normandy, a flying bomb landed in the middle of one night. The staff, apart from the guard on duty, both soldiers and A.T.S., were sleeping the sleep of the just after a long spell of working overtime that the stores might be ready for shipment overseas. As the huge fire caused by the bomb blazed up into the dark sky, and the alarm sounded, they jerked themselves into sudden wakefulness.

On the instant they realised what had happened. The stores, the precious stores, were in danger !

A.T.S. officers and hundreds of Auxiliaries groped for their battle-dresses and pulled them on over their pyjamas —one officer completed her attire with a pair of brand new bedroom slippers, the only footgear she could find in the scramble, and when she viewed them in the dawn light, she saw that their career had been short and sweet. Running out, these girls worked side by side with the troops throughout the night, fighting the flames and salvaging the stores.

An Auxiliary said afterwards, "I don't think I ever had felt real cold anger until that night. We'd sweated blood

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to get those stores ready for shipment, and we knew too well how terribly badly they were needed. We were all so mad that we seemed to develop a kind of super-human energy.''

Her words were true, for the A.T.S. performed tasks which would have been beyond women's ability at any other time. Groups of them shoved loaded railway trucks and vans to safety. Others dragged heavy cartons and packs away from the fire. Many of them seized buckets and formed a sort of human hosepipe, working with remarkable speed and calmness. As a soldier said: ''They were grand. Their faces were as black as the ace of spades, but they kept going *and* kept cheery.''

And as they toiled—trust the A.T.S.—they sang, ''*This is the Army, Mr. Brown* !''

In the cookhouse, the A.T.S. staff were minus light, power and water, but somehow they managed to produce enormous quantities of tea and plenty of sandwiches for everyone when morning came, and the weary fire-fighters realised that their job was done, and practically all the stores were saved. Having swallowed a meal, they rolled into bed, dirty as they were, but after snatching a couple of hours' sleep, they reported for ordinary duty at the normal time. Not all the flying bombs Germany could muster could be allowed to hinder supplies going to Normandy !

In his official report of the incident, the Commandant of the depot said: ''Our loss in stores was insignificant, owing to the way in which everyone helped. If not actually in danger of their lives the A.T.S. were in danger of serious injury, and if ever there was an example of team spirit at its best, this was it. Next day production went on as if nothing had happened, our programme was maintained, stores were dealt with as they arrived—preserved, cartonned, packed, cased and loaded for Normandy.''

One phrase stands out in that announcement: ''*If ever there was an example of team spirit at its best, this was it.*''

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IV

At the time of the *Baedecker* raids on Exeter, two companies of A.T.S. were billeted in hostels in the city, while other were in a hutted camp. During the first raid, of May 1st, a thousand-pound bomb fell just beside the latter, with the result that so many uniforms were damaged by blast that, in the morning, the girls appeared in a strange variety of costumes to eat a breakfast prepared by pyjama-clad cooks.

"Nobody," remarked one of their officers, drily, "was late for duty."

But it was in the May 4th, and far worse raid, that the A.T.S. girls really showed their mettle. Their hostels were exceedingly badly knocked about—afterwards they were pronounced unfit for habitation, and owing to the fierceness of the raid, the officers were unable to contact the other ranks. Quite undeterred, the N.C.O.s and Auxiliaries held a council of war on their own. It was all too evident that the enemy were not only dropping incendiaries and H.E., but were dive-bombing and machine-gunning as well ; and the A.T.S. decided it was up to them to help Exeter as much as possible. Few of them had been through a raid before ; most were in their late 'teens or early twenties—those things simply didn't count. There was a job to do and they had to do it.

Large numbers of them offered their services to the N.F.S., and spent the night running messages, a gruelling task, as roads were either impassable or littered with rubble, and the booming of our Ack-Ack guns alternated with the crash of falling bombs. Three of these girls, all of them under twenty-one, hauled hoses for several hours for the chief fireman, and were immensely pleased when he gave them a note to their officer, explaining matters, lest they received a reprimand for being away from billets !

Another group of Auxiliaries were told that a hospital and an infirmary had been badly hit. Entirely on their

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own initiative, they dashed down to the buildings and helped in the evacuation of the inmates, many of whom were old and bedridden. Not content, the girls showed remarkable thoughtfulness, because they realised how miserable and shaken the elderly folk must be and whisked them off to one of their less-damaged hostels. Wrapping their patients in rugs, greatcoats—anything that came handy—they then organised a "begging" expedition, going from house to house asking for provisions so that they might prepare hot drinks and food for their homeless friends.

Individual acts of bravery were numerous. One A.T.S. corporal joined forces with an Army warrant officer and climbed with him on to a blazing roof to try to put out the fire. As they were hard at it, the roof began to give way under them, and they crashed with it to the top floor. Fortunately they escaped with bumps and bruises, and undaunted by the experience, found another way back to the roof. It is worth recording that the A.T.S. officers would have known nothing of this incident had not the warrant officer reported it to his Colonel.

Three girls, one of whom had only been in the A.T.S. six weeks, were doing guard on church property. They stayed on the roof until the raid became intense, then came down into the building itself. A few minutes later it received a direct hit, the bomb falling a mere ten yards from the Auxiliaries and causing a heavy door and showers of glass splinters from the windows to fall on top of them. Wriggling themselves free, they shook the glass from hair and clothing, and decided they had better continue fire-watching outside the ruins. Most people would have had enough for one night; but not the A.T.S. When volunteers were called for to quench the fire on a blazing roof-top, the three calmly formed themselves into a stirrup-pump team, and pumped steadily for almost two hours. This episode had a violent anti-climax, for when the overworked fire brigade arrived at last, the men did not realise anyone was still on the roof, and turned their hoses full on the poor Auxiliaries!

Examples of ATS

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One of the A.T.S. sergeant-majors, a former hairdresser, heard of a particularly bad incident and mustered a rescue squad of her girls. With their bare hands they dug in rubble, extricating the dead and dying and carrying them away. They also rendered first-aid to the seriously injured, and when they heard children's screams coming from a burning house they fought their way into it regardless of danger in a vain attempt to find them.

The same sergeant-major organised a bucket chain with the aid of fifty A.T.S. cooks, clerks and orderlies when fire broke out in an empty house opposite her hostel, thus saving all the other houses in the street, while a lance-corporal cook, who spent the night helping to dig victims out of their demolished homes, walked back in the morning to her sadly damaged kitchen, managed somehow to get a fire going, rummaged around salvaging provisions, and cooked a good breakfast for her company.

Another cook, a corporal, found an open grate the sole usable article left in her kitchen, so she practised emergency cooking in real earnest. With bricks taken from bombed-out houses, cement made out of garden earth and water, and several flattened tins, she and her three assistant cooks built a most elegant field kitchen. With this and the open grate they turned out an excellent meal of roast beef and potatoes for sixty people.

Despite all these activities the A.T.S. suffered only two casualties—both of whom carried on with their fire-fighting until their injuries were discovered. One girl was filling a fire-bucket at her hostel sink when the building got a direct hit and the whole kitchen fell in on her, injuring her leg. The other was a sergeant who was thrown to the ground by blast and received severe bruises in both eyes.

Strangely enough the A.T.S. were reluctant to leave Exeter after the raids, so reluctant that one party from a damaged hostel sneaked back to clean it up in the hope that they would then be allowed to stay there. They shovelled the plaster away, knocked the broken panes out of the windows, mopped up the mess where incendiaries had been attacked with stirrup-pumps, and cleaned the

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rooms. Great was their disappointment when the premises were condemned as uninhabitable.

"We'll go back," they said, "just as soon as they can find us a billet."

They did go back eventually, these Auxiliaries who had won high praise from Exeter's citizens, and with them they took several dogs who had attached themselves to the strength during the raids, and a black-and-white cat named "Blast," because a bomb simply blew him into their doorway.

"We like Exeter," they said, comfortably.

Exeter gladly returned the compliment: it liked the A.T.S.

V

At Easter, 1941, a number of A.T.S. cooks were attached to a heavy Ack-Ack battery on the outskirts of Belfast, and whenever the alert sounded the girls used to report to the cookhouse in order to brew cocoa for the gun-teams. One night, while they were busy on this job, a shower of incendiaries dropped on the men's sleeping quarters next door and set them ablaze. Naturally the gunners were all at their action stations, so the A.T.S. corporal cook and her two assistants tackled the incendiaries first with sand-bags and, when the supply of these ran out, with the lids of swill bins. They had to work under a positive hail of H.E.s and land mines which were coming down all round—but they got the fires under control and, most important of all, saved their cookhouse.

Other cooks, working for one of the Ulster regiments, were not so fortunate, as their cookhouse suffered a direct hit and was completely destroyed, while to make matters worse, the cooks themselves were bombed our of their billest during the same raid. Cold and bedraggled, they turned up for duty next morning to find nothing save a heap of rubble. They did, however, manage to serve the men with tea from a temporary canteen, and thereafter

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for several months worked under extreme difficulties, using trench fires and other makeshifts.

"Och, and they didn't complain either," said an Ulsterman. "Mind, I'd always thought myself these little bits of English girls were no use at all, at all; but I'd fly in the face of anyone who talked them down ever since that Easter Tuesday."

VI

One small group of A.T.S. girls face daily another kind of danger which has nothing to do with enemy action. Their job is to repair thousands of rounds of ammunition sent back from Army units all over the world to be re-conditioned and reissued to the troops.

It is a job which has never before been done by women. The men, who were replaced by the first seventeen "pioneer" Auxiliaries, were fully trained to the work, but not one of the girls had so much as handled ammunition before she was posted to the depot. Their lance-corporal was an Irishwoman, daughter of a Regular Army officer, and among the auxiliaries were the manageress of a green-grocer's shop, several shop assistants, a few factory hands, one or two clerks and a bottle-washer.

Wearing slacks and denim overalls, the ammunition examiners unpack the shells, take each round to pieces, fit new parts, reassemble, grease, and finally paint the outsides of the shells. All ammunition thus repaired has then to be packed in boxes with detailed lists stencilled on them. By a date late in 1942, these "pioneers" had already saved the country hundreds and thousands of pounds and salvaged thousands of rounds of ammunition.

One of their earliest jobs was a consignment of some thousands of rounds which had been badly damaged when the ship in which it was travelling went on fire, and the magazines had to be flooded. They made every shell serviceable once more, and the consignment was soon on its way to some theatre of war.

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To begin with, some of them found the shells heavy to handle—for they had to deal with such varying types as 3.7 howitzers, two-pounders, smoke shells and anti-tank shells; but very soon they discovered that a knack of balancing was more useful than sheer physical strength, and in a short time they managed this part of the work with ease. They also learnt to fit fuses to new shells which were delivered straight from the factory, and their output per man-hour has consistently kept as high as that of the soldiers they replaced.

The work is dirty and greasy as well as requiring constant watchfulness, but the girls call it "a fine job," and the visitor can hear them before she sees them, because they sing the livelong day. The "choir" is led by an Auxiliary who was a chocolate-packer before the war, and while *Pistol Packing Mamma* and *Pass the Ammunition* are natural favourites, *Loch Lomond* and the songs of Harry Lauder are good runners-up—there are four Scots lassies among the ammunition examiners, and to listen to one of them crooning *Annie Laurie* to a howitzer shell is an education in itself.

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CHAPTER VI

"THE BACK ROOM GIRLS"

I

THERE are many types of "back room girls" in the A.T.S., but the title was given primarily to the Auxiliaries—well over five hundred of them—who work in Second Echelon, A.T.S., and they own yet a third name which I think is the nicest of all: "The Foster-mothers of the British Liberation Armies."

They know all the answers, not to questions concerning guns or tanks, landing-packs or "recce" cars; but to questions concerning the joys and sorrows, the welfare and next-of-kin of that grandest of men, Mr. Thomas Atkins.

Suppose news is wanted of a soldier who is on the danger-list of some hospital—Second Echelon will supply all details. Or a high official requires the latest casualty figures—Second Echelon will produce them. A front-line soldier has to be found a new job because he is medically down-graded—Second Echelon will forward a neat little card with his record, his previous employment, his capabilities and his medical category typed upon it.

For Second Echelon has charge of those most precious things, the documents of the soldier in the field.

"Not that the average person believes they're precious," said an Auxiliary. "I didn't myself, until I worked here. I thought this outfit was just another piece of Army red-tape. But soldiers must have documents; without

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them they'd get lost, simply have no entity. I work in P.I.M. branch, that's Provision of Information Miscellaneous, and we have to keep tabs on all B.L.A. personnel, so you can imagine it's a pretty hefty job! Our Junior Commander is the first woman ever to replace an Army officer in any Echelon formation, so we've got a bit of a reputation to keep up.''

''What sort of 'tabs,' exactly?''

''Well, here's a request for details of Private Smith. It gives his number and regiment, that's all. By tomorrow morning I'll be able to tell you an awful lot about Private Smith; precisely where he's stationed, when he embarked, where he was in this country from enlistment onwards, what he did in civil life, how old he is, where he was born, if he's married, if he has any children. I expect I'll be able to add to that, too—how many teeth he has, and if he's got an appendix scar. All that sort of thing.''

''It's funny,'' she went on, ''how you build up a mental picture of Private Smith while you're working on his history. We have a kind of game here, telling each other what we think So-and-So must be like. Frightful blow the other day. I'd had lots of requests for information about a man, and honestly he sounded as if he was like Adonis. Then he won a decoration, and I saw his photograph in the papers, and he was bald, with a snub nose.''

''It must be interesting work?''

''Oh, rather. I mean, we're dealing with *people*: it's far more thrilling than the job most A.T.S. clerks do. We get fearfully excited when any of our particular pets get into the news because of some gallant action, and we get equally depressed if one of our lads gets sent to the glasshouse. I met a woman the other day when I was on leave, the wife of one of the boys I look after. She'd have had seven fits if I'd rattled off all my knowledge of her husband!''

Another branch of Echelon has a sadder task, for it is their job to inform the next-of-kin if a soldier is wounded,

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missing, or killed. Sometimes news comes through that a man is wounded, but no details of which hospital he is in are yet available, and in these cases the Auxiliaries have to use both judgment and discretion as to the notification to be sent to his relatives.

"It's rather difficult," said one. "We don't want them to worry unnecessarily, to think their husband or son is terribly ill when perhaps he is only slightly wounded. On the other hand, we must let them know at once that he is in hospital. I know sometimes the relatives think us vague and callous, because we can't give accurate details right away. We can't expect them to realise the difficulties which arise when there is a push on and men from different units get all mixed up ; but some of their inquiries—well, they make you wonder how you'd behave if such a thing happened to one of your own people."

"I dread the 'missing, believed killed' most," said another Auxiliary. "There's nothing definite to go on, and there's always the far hope that the man is alive. It's a hope that grows, too, I've noticed, as time passes and no fresh news comes through. In certain cases, of course, he turns up safe and sound, and we can write and tell his people. That's a real joy—even if we do have to use official phrases."

One might think that girls employed continually on the work of reporting casualties might grow case-hardened to human suffering. The opposite is true. The longer an Auxiliary serves in this department of Second Echelon the more she feels for the relatives who wait so anxiously for news.

In a third section of Echelon one A.T.S. clerk has been very busy indeed since D Day. Her job is in E.P.W.—Enemy Prisoners of War—and she will tell you that she enjoys working overtime, because that means things are moving in our favour, and several thousand more Germans are knocked out of the war. So far she is the only Auxiliary clerk in this branch and in her leisure hours she is busily learning German from her soldier colleagues.

E.P.W. branch guards many secrets which Dr. Goebbels

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would dearly like to have known. In its files are details of the numbers of prisoners taken in each engagement, all particulars of individuals, and lists of the possessions found on each man at the time of capture. Another set of files contains documents found in enemy offices or on enemy personnel, and attached to each one is not only a direct translation into English, but also a summary of the contents.

Sales assistants, insurance clerks, concert artists, youth club workers, girls who joined up straight from school—all these work in Second Echelon ; and the Senior Commander in charge of them was serving with the A.T.S. as a cook before the war, rose to the rank of sergeant, and went to France in 1940 with the B.E.F.

II

Occasionally you may meet an Auxiliary wearing a five-starred dark crimson badge on her arm. Most probably you take her for an orderly attached to the R.A.M.C., but she is a little more than that, she is one of the blood transfusion orderlies, and if you question her you will find she is extremely proud of belonging to the *only* distinct and specialised transfusion service of any Army, Allied or enemy, in the world.

Six months before the outbreak of war an Army blood depot started work somewhere in the south-west of England. Then it possessed a staff of half a dozen ; now, nearly three hundred and fifty people work in it and ninety per cent. of these are members of the A.T.S.

The girls assemble all the complicated rubber and glass apparatus required for the blood-taking and blood-giving sets, sometimes even blowing their own glass tubes. They test for bacteria with microscopes and they sterilise and bottle the fluid plasma which may mean new life to wounded men, to air-raid casualties, perhaps to civilian hospital cases.

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Practically none of the Auxiliaries had any scientific or medical training or knowledge, but they do their job carefully and well, clad in white overalls and face-masks, and they have developed a sound understanding of chemical substances.

The laboratory girls look after the "separator," the machine which separates the fluid plasma from the red corpuscles. Then they filter the fluid plasma through steam-sterilised pads and send it to the hygienic "out-of-bounds" room where more Auxiliaries bottle it. At first difficulty was experienced with the plasma clotting, but a method has now been devised which stops this.

In the adjoining Bacteriological Department, the blood is subjected to certain tests, and here a nineteen-year-old A.T.S. corporal helps with highly skilled research work. Formerly an operator in a stocking factory, she is anxious to become a permanent laboratory assistant after the war.

Other auxiliaries are kept busy preparing "crystalloids," made from saline or glucose. For the six to eight thousand bottles which are dispatched each week they have to distil about a thousand litres of water a day, and the bulk of the "crystalloids" are sent to the United States Forces.

Then there are the "needle sharpeners"; the girls who twirl the needles used for injecting purposes on oily stones until they are exactly right. This is a job more difficult than it appears, as it needs firm fingers and a high degree of precision; but the really adept Auxiliary manages to do over three hundred a day.

Not very far away from the main depot is the "shadow factory," and it can carry on work entirely independently if necessary. Here is housed the £20,000 dried plasma plant which was presented to the Transfusion Service by the Silver Thimble Fund. An Officer of the Royal Engineers is in charge of this, and he is assisted by A.T.S. staff who are very keen on learning the engineering side. The plant produces an average of twelve hundred pints of dried plasma a week, and has never stopped running since its installation.

But there is another side to the Transfusion Service,

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perhaps the most necessary side of all, for without blood donors no plasma could be produced. The main depot possesses fifteen "bleeding teams," each consisting of a medical officer, four V.A.D.s and three A.T.S., two of whom are drivers and the third an orderly.

They lead a strenuous life, as "provincial bleeds" are arranged for eight to twelve teams every single day, and more often than not the drivers have an awkward time manœuvring the vans loaded with all their equipment up and down narrow country roads.

"But we haven't been beaten yet," said one. "And we've undertaken 'provincial bleeds' in some odd places. Normally we requisition a hall, but once we used a local churchyard in a Cotswold village. The only thing we can't take with us is running water, so we have to make sure of that requirement wherever we go. Of course, we drivers don't just sit about when we reach our destination. One of us welcomes the donors—some of them are a bit nervy and agitated; and the other lays on tea for those who have been 'bled.' The orderly, poor dear, acts as sort of head cook and bottlewasher. She does a bit of everything, and usually helps the M.O."

The main depot sends abroad to the different theatres of war all transfusion material and equipment which cannot be obtained on the spot, as well as supplying civilian hospitals and R.A.F. stations in the west of England and a large proportion of the United States Forces. Its clerical staff of A.T.S. is kept particularly busy, as records of over a quarter of a million donors have to be filed for reference.

Other girls are kept hard at it, looking after medical and linen supplies, and washing thousands of bottles and hundreds of miles of rubber tubing; while the cooks and orderlies, in addition to feeding personnel, have to provide packed meals for the "bleeding teams."

Packing is another big item in the depot. Soldiers do the heavy lifting, but the Auxiliaries pack about twenty tons of material and equipment a week for overseas forces, and also make up smaller packages which are sent

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by air to stations in this country and in Northern Europe. The packers are very proud of a new gadget, a special parachute set in a padded basket, which can be dropped from practially any height without damage to the plasma.

So important is this "back room" work that a new A.T.S. trade has come into being, that of "Transfusion Technician." In order to earn the title, the girls have to attend lectures on the various chemical processes used and sit examinations in subjects dealing with the composition of the blood, the making of both fluid and dried plasma, and the assembling of the giving and receiving sets.

III

In June, 1942, five Auxiliaries reported for duty at a room in the War Office. In civilian life they had been either professional or keen amateur photographers, and they were fresh from a further training period in the Post Office Research station. Their new job was to help with the Microgram Service, an advanced and perfected form of micro-photography which is now used for the sending of official documents.

Nearly all such documents used to be transmitted by rail or sea, very unsatisfactory methods, as they either took months to reach their desination or were lost by enemy action at sea. Thanks to the Microgram, their delivery has been speeded up to a remarkable degree, and while formerly this service operated mainly from overseas to Britain, it is now being quickly developed in the opposite direction.

The system works in the following manner. The Microgram units with the overseas Armies make microscopic negatives of the documents on lengths of film—sometimes a hundred feet of film bears the negatives of sixteen hundred documents. If possible, the films are developed before being sent home by air, but in many cases facilities are not available, and the negatives have

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to be forwarded as they are, in a tiny metal container about the size of a two-ounce tobacco tin.

On the arrival of the containers in this country the A.T.S. girls begin to play their part. They unpack the films carefully and, if they are undeveloped, develop and dry them with chamois cloths on a revolving drum. They then put them through a micro-printer, which makes enlarged copies of the documents and also fixes, washes and dries the prints at such speed that a thousand documents an hour are turned out.

"I rather fancied my photographic knowledge until I took on this job," said an operator, "but, believe me, I knew less than nothing! This machine is extremely complicated, and took a lot of study before I got the hang of it, and what they didn't teach us about photographic papers and chemicals at the Research Station wasn't worth knowing!"

"Don't you find it rather a monotonous job?"

"Heavens, no! There's a fresh twist to it every day. Besides, just think of the training I'm getting. I'll be able to set up as a Microgram expert on my own after the war."

She had something there.

IV

If you see an Auxiliary wearing a flash on which a sword is shown against a black background topped with blue and a multi-coloured strip you will know she belongs to S.H.A.E.F., the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces. Most likely, however, you will not realise that this flash was designed by an A.T.S. corporal who works in the H.Q. topographical office with three British and three American soldiers as colleagues. She assembles maps in sections for the use of high-ranking officers and did some good work on those used at the Quebec Conference. It is a tricky job, as much information has to be transferred to each map and the layout of

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forces and features of the countryside carefully filled in ; but the corporal found time to design the flash which she herself wears, and she holds the cherished original painting of it that General Eisenhower autographed for her.

She made the flash as a symbol of the Allied aims. The sword is the sword of liberation, and the black background represents Nazi oppression. The blue stands for the skies of peace and the multi-coloured strip is a rainbow fashioned from the Allied colours.

There is, of course, a certain glamour about working in S.H.A.E.F., the actual heart which pumps the blood through the Allied arteries ; but the jobs there are hard and exacting, and the five hundred A.T.S. officers and Auxiliaries who wear the S.H.A.E.F. flash have all been most carefully picked, for in addition to being efficient they must possess an acute sense of security.

The A.T.S. in S.H.A.E.F. form part of a highly organised Super-Combined Operations team, working alongside the Royal Navy and the Wrens, the United States Army and the W.A.C.S., the British Army, the R.A.F. and the W.A.A.F. With the other women's Services, they share barrack-rooms, recreation rooms and mess-rooms in a camp which is run superbly on American lines. W.A.C.S. run the kitchen, the laundry, and the "post exchange" which takes the place of the N.A.A.F.I., and sells American cigarettes, toilet articles and so forth.

One A.T.S. officer is personal assistant to the Chief of Staff, another helps his deputy, and several more act as Staff officers in the Intelligence and Civil Affairs divisions. One Auxiliary works in the Publicity and Psychological Warfare department, and two more are attached to the European and Allied Contacts section.

Forty-six A.T.S. are members of a large mixed M.T. company which is responsible for a shuttle car service. This is a gruelling job, for the company pays no heed to regular hours, and girls are often on duty for extremely long periods during "rushes" ; but to lighten matters, the A.T.S. girls have invented a game of counting scalps—the two which win highest marks are General Eisenhower

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and Field-Marshal Montgomery, for sometimes the leaders' personal drivers are not available, and then an Auxiliary may have the terrific thrill of driving one of the great men.

But it is in the S.H.A.E.F. Signal Unit that the A.T.S. really come into their own, and the hundreds of girls who work there feel they are at the very nerve-centre of the invading Armies. Six of their cypher officers help to deal with what is known as "Top Secret Traffic," and the rest, together with Wrens and W.A.A.F., man one of the biggest switchboards in the world. It was nine A.T.S. operators who put out all over the globe General Eisenhower's first D Day communiqué regarding the Allied landings in France and that is an event they will never forget.

They will not forget either that they were among the first to hear of these landings, for very early on D Day every girl working in S.H.A.E.F. received a copy of the personal message from General Eisenhower which was issued to all men taking part in the invasion.

Some of the A.T.S. have followed S.H.A.E.F. overseas ; others are eagerly awaiting the summons to go.

"We've got something to remember for the rest of our lives," said one. "Think of the tales we'll be able to tell our grandchildren ?"

"Oh, but you're in Signals," said another. "We M.T.s have the best job. D'you know what my bag is up to date ? The C.-in-C., two Field-Marshals, one Admiral, two Air Marshals and a whole long list of lesser celebrities. I've got so high-hat I just don't count anyone below the rank of Major-General."

I left them wrangling happily as to the merits of their particular jobs. In their hearts they knew no real rivalry—they all wore the S.H.A.E.F. flash, that was the only thing which counted.

V

On the day the news of the Dieppe raid came through

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an Auxiliary listened eagerly to the wireless.

"Those are our lads," she said excitedly. "Goodness, I could tell you every little bit of their equipment, from mugs to portable oil-stoves, from fire-fighting appliances to mobile hospitals. You see, we prepared and packed them all."

Since that day she has had many proud moments when she hears or reads of Allied landings, because for every one of these she and her companions at a Central Ordnance Depot have seen to it that the Forces employed have all they need.

"And then we've refitted them when they come back," she said. "There are bound to be all kinds of losses—especially in what we call 'domestic issue,' the personal things like knives and spoons and blankets which each soldier takes with him."

Going around the stores where these Auxiliaries worked I realised for the first time what an immense variety of equipment soldiers do need. In one shed, beds and bedding were piled up to the ceiling, in another were stacks of tool-chests, in a third a positive army of bicycles, in a fourth thousands and thousands of saucepans and cook-stoves.

The sergeant in charge smiled. "Lots of people are astonished when they see our stores. So many of them seem to think a soldier just needs a rifle and ammunition to go into a raid with—*we* know better. He simply can't live without hundreds of odd things that don't seem to have any direct connection with war. I wouldn't change this job for a lot. We've been responsible for kitting up the troops for raids from Burma to Norway. Every time news of one comes through we chalk it up on the wall."

This "back room" job might seem dull to some; but not to the girls who do it. Busy as they are, they still find time to tuck little good-luck messages in beside the contents lists of packs, and they have their reward when a soldier writes how grateful he is that everything was in order.

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VI

In a remote district of Scotland a group of A.T.S. girls are working with Wrens and W.A.A.F. at a Combined Operations Centre where Commandos are trained.

"The poor things," said an Auxiliary cook. "Before we came they were living on wee bits of birds and any fish they could catch, and a sort of dough they had made themselves and called bread. Why, they even ate grass, they told me!"

"Get away with you, Cookie," laughed another. "They were only pulling your leg."

"No, they weren't," exclaimed the cook. "Talk about toughening! The poor lads were fair starved. Anyway, they don't go hungry now. They have a decent meal whatever time they come home from an exercise."

"Oh, Cookie spoils them—and don't *we* know it, as orderlies. She'll root us out of our beds at two in the morning if her precious boys come roaring in wanting something to eat."

"My God," said an Auxiliary who had just walked into the kitchen. "Anybody know if it *ever* stops raining in Scotland? I've been here three months and I've never seen the coastline yet."

The cook bristled. "It's a better climate nor you'll get in that England of yours. Fine and healthy, *and* it makes your hair curl!"

"You can keep it, chum. Pity your people don't build some more railways."

"You've got a pair of feet, haven't you? Come on now, there's no time for talking for the lads will be back in half an hour, hungry as hunters."

While the orderlies set tables and the cooks prepared masses of bacon and eggs I wandered round the Quartermaster's stores. Here Auxiliaries looked after a frightening selection of ammunition and equipment used in operational training.

"What's that?" I pointed to a fearsome object.

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"A smoke-bomb," said the A.T.S. Corporal. "And how do you like our line in knives—pretty little things, aren't they?"

"M'm, they certainly look useful. I say, what did you do before the war?"

"I was a typist in an insurance office."

It seemed a queer change to come from that decorous existence to a store bristling with the accoutrements of modern warfare, but I was growing used to meeting A.T.S. whose present job was utterly at variance with their former one.

"And do you like being skied up here?"

"I hated it to begin with, but this summer I've taken to swimming in the loch. It's a bit icy, but it keeps you fit."

I noticed that all the Auxiliaries in this camp had caught the desire for physical fitness from the Commandos with whom they worked. They swam and ran and held jumping competitions and they looked, and were, about as tough as the men-folk.

In the Camp Post Office two Auxiliaries were answering a variety of odd questions from a batch of men who had just arrived.

"It's queer," said one afterwards, "but we have the greatest difficulty in explaining to the new boys that this is a genuine post office. They think it's some sort of Heath Robinson arrangement and we have to din into their heads the information that they can post letters, buy stamps, register letters or parcels, send telegrams, in fact do everything they would do in a proper civilian post office."

"Yes," said her companion, "but then most of them think they've come to Mars. I don't blame them either. I thought so myself when I arrived. And to think that six months ago I didn't know what a Scotch mist was! Oh, well . . ."

She began to sing under her breath:

"It isn't the Wrens who get the men,
The A.T.S. are here again . . ."

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Certainly the view from the post office window was depressing. A grey moor stretched to a greyer sea, and behind the moor reared the dark smudgy shapes of mountains. The mist was wet and penetrating and the ground underfoot so soggy that Wellington boots were a necessity.

"And it's mostly like this," said the singing Auxiliary. "*When* we get a fine day, mind you, it's sheer heaven—but you see those red rings round certain days on that wall calendar? Well, those were the days we actually saw the sun. And it's July, mind you."

I walked out and across to the officers' mess where an A.T.S. sergeant bustled busily round seeing that the long tables were in order.

"We cater for three hundred here—Navy, Army and Air Force. I really think they eat twice as much as men do in any other camp. But they're grand lads, just like kids. They're so pleased with the least thing you do for them."

She had looked after two children as their "nanny" before the war. Now she had increased the number of her charges, but she remained as watchful, as careful as ever.

Going back to the cookhouse I saw the Commandos swinging across the moor. They were plastered in mud and laden like Christmas trees with all their equipment. From the post office came the Auxiliary's voice lifted in song and the men took up the refrain to the tune of "Mademoiselle from Armentieres"—

"It isn't the Wrens who get the men,
The A.T.S. are here again . . ."

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CHAPTER IX

PRELUDE TO INVASION

I

IN the long months before D Day people thought precious little about the A.T.S. It was natural that all their hopes and fears should be centred round the soldiers, all their conversation round the possible date of the invasion that must come. But it was during those months that the A.T.S. carried out possibly the finest job of its career in feeding and equipping the men and preparing their armour, their vehicles, every least thing they required to take across the Channel.

In every Headquarters where the final plans for the Liberation of Europe were perfected were A.T.S. clerks, signallers and drivers—and some of the first-named had worked so long and so closely on certain blue-prints that when they themselves were drafted over to the Continent and reached the coast of France they immediately recognised one of the huge prefabricated harbours.

Auxiliaries in the great Ordnance Depots knew a bigger "Number One Priority rush" than they had ever known, and for months on end willingly sacrificed their free time and their social life so that the Army might be ready.

One especially interesting job they did was to help with the "waterproofing" of tanks so that these might "wade" from the landing-craft to the beaches. It was Auxiliaries, working in mobile teams, who unpacked all the stores for this very secret new equipment, stacked

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them in certain order so that the men who were fitting the kit might know exactly where to find everything, measured off required lengths of the different components and assembled complete kits for ten tanks or lorries before packing them up carefully in crates stencilled with the names of the vehicles for which they were to be used.

So "hush-hush" was the waterproofing kit that none of the A.T.S. storewomen knew exactly how it was fitted on to any vehicle. What they did know—and remember—was that if they forgot or inaccurately measured one single item then the vehicle would not "wade" ashore.

To these Auxiliaries life meant just one thing for many months—waterproofing kit ; and they are now enormously proud of the Army's nickname for them—"the waders."

But all over the country storewomen in the many different Depots were working for invasion ; unloading and taking on charge stores which came straight from the factories, maintaining and arranging them while they stayed in the Depots, choosing them, labelling them, checking them and at last packing them to be sent off to the troops.

In one R.A.O.C. Depot, Auxiliaries worked in a store-house divided into four sections, each holding stores of a particular type. Apart from the trained team of girls employed in every section a "flying squad" of expert Auxiliaries was mobilised in order to speed up production. They knew the whole store backwards and could be sent from section to section as the work demanded.

From this Depot the A.T.S. packed and despatched every possible sort of communication equipment ; from helioscopes to wireless sets, from field telephones to telescopes, from compasses to searchlight and radio-location apparatus, together with all necessary spare parts and tools, so that the men at the other end might be able to lay hands on each necessary article without delay.

"We supplied the Commandos with their watches, too," said an Auxiliary. "Wonderful watches, they time their attacks by them, and as men's lives and perhaps the

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success or failure of the whole attack rested on them we had to be awfully careful with their packing.''

Altogether 25,000 items of communication equipment were sent out by Auxiliaries from this Depot, and everything had to be checked and double-checked to ensure that not the slightest error was made. The girls knew only too well that the stores they examined and packed would not be opened until they reached the actual battle zone, where a faulty connection in a field telephone or even a tiny screw packed in a wrong container might mean delay and perhaps unnecessary loss of life. So hour after hour they worked like beavers, dealing with the stores which flowed into the Depot from all parts of the Empire and from the United States as well—and apart from their actual work they had to be able to identify every one of the 25,000 items under their charge, for one day they might be sorting and packing miles of cable (they had 300 different types in stock !), the next signal flags, the third containers of distilled water for accumulators, the fourth the light wireless sets the troops can carry into action on their backs, the fifth pigeon parachutes in which the birds in their cages float down from the 'plane to land in some prearranged place.

Besides the storekeepers there are the A.T.S. truck and crane drivers—the crane here is driven by a girl of twenty-one, an ex-post office assistant who has been in the Depot over two years and likes her clumsy vehicle so much she says she wouldn't change her job for any other in the Service, while a girl a year older drives a two-ton truck and declares she ''would hate to be off it.''

So they hustled on with their job, all these girls drawn from all parts fo the country and from all sorts of occupations ; shop assistants, bus conductresses, dressmakers, factory hands, preparing for the day when the men would go ''over there.''

II

At a Central Ordnance Depot in Southern England I

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asked an Auxiliary what she did.

"Oh, I'm a 'Dilly' driver."

"What is that?"

"I tow the guns and heavy stuff from one workshop to another."

That girl was what is known as a "burler and mender" in civilian life. She worked in a cloth factory and looked for flaws in the material as it came off the loom. She had never driven any motor vehicle, but was trained at the Depot and seemed to tow her sinister loads along in the most carefree manner.

Another Auxiliary here working hard for D Day was a twenty-two year old girl who had trained for eight months for her job of computing the life and future use of guns. Using mathematical calculations she checked the measurements of the armament inspectors and actually had the final word as to whether a particular gun was fit for overseas service or not. The accuracy of her calculations was amazing—it had to be, for human life might depend on her decision.

In the shops Auxiliaries were enormously busy. Some were bending over turning lathe or driller, making the most delicate adjustments and modifications in gun parts. Others were expert acetylene welders working on gun and vehicle parts. Others again were making and fitting canvas covers on the guns before they were sent to the ports from which they would be shipped abroad.

One Auxiliary, doing joinery and carpentry, had a particularly interesting history, for she was the first woman to pass the Army tests in this trade. When she joined the A.T.S. she stated her hopes of being allowed to do so because she and her sister had run a chicken farm and with the help of their father, an ex-joiner, had made all their own hen houses! No Auxiliary previously had trained for joinery and carpentry, but this one put her case so well and showed such aptitude for the work that in the end she had her way, thus becoming an A.T.S. pioneer.

Side by side with the men of the R.A.O.C. the Auxiliaries

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worked all through the winter of 1943-44, all through the spring before D Day when the very air hummed with rumours and everybody's nerves were stretched taut. You found them everywhere, in office, store or workshop, or driving trucks or cranes. Here were skilled mechanics handling radiolocation and wireless assembly or repairing sets ; there were girls seeing to the preservation of equipment ; in a far shed a third group gave expert examination to stores which had been returned after suffering damage in action and passed them on to yet another group who would recondition them. And in the background, working as hard as their companions employed on maintenance, was a positive army of cooks, orderlies, typists, clerks, telephonists and teleprinter operators.

During those pre-invasion months men in key positions at the Depot were being continually replaced by Auxiliaries, who proved by their eagerness and ability that they could be relied upon to carry on the high tradition of the R.A.O.C., the Corps whose job it is to supply the Armies with all the weapons of modern warfare.

As with the Auxiliaries so with their officers. To ease the situation caused by the necessity for drafting hundreds of R.A.O.C. officers overseas, A.T.S. officers gradually took their places in the huge Ordnance Depots in this country both in administrative and technical jobs. Their numbers are growing daily now, because 290 have been called for and the majority are still in training, but even before D Day twenty-five of them had started work. Sixteen of them were convoy officers responsible for kitting, maintenance, collection and delivery of vehicles ; one was the War Office liaison officer at a small arms Depot deciding priority of issues ; two controlled large staffs—mostly of women—working on Issues Control at a Motor Transport Depot, and one was appointed Staff Officer to the Controller of Ordnance Services in order to administer and co-ordinate the work of her colleagues in the various depots.

One Junior Commander, a Staff Officer whose job is arranging for the distribution of ammunition, weapons

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and armoured vehicles in Western Command, was—and still is—in popular demand during her spare time. The Auxiliaries doing their gruelling tasks in the Ordnance Depots were especially anxious for news of the actual ways in which the weapons and armour they looked after and packed were used in action. So the Junior Commander duly visited them, bringing with her little models of English and American tanks, armoured cars, Bren and tommy guns and grenades. With these, after a preparatory talk on the history of tanks, she demonstrated their uses and battle action ; the range and fire of different guns and their mechanical fitting and operation, and a general description of modern battle tactics.

Her lectures were immensely popular—and not only among Auxiliaries, for this young woman of twenty-nine had acquired an expert knowledge of the making and mechanical action of armaments since her training at the A.T.S. Staff College, where she not only attended manœuvres but rode in various types of tanks under the tutelage of members of the Guards' Armoured Brigade. Curiously enough, she was a Domestic Science teacher before the war !

III

In the spring and early summer of 1944 barbed wire entanglements surrounded the woods of one of England's most famous beauty spots. Had you been able to pass the barbed wire you would have found thousands and thousands of lorries, trucks, gun-carriers and jeeps "parked" under the trees which formed an excellent camouflage, for this was a highly important R.A.O.C. Vehicle Reserve Depot and, as the Company of A.T.S. who worked there would have told you, "We're supplying the D Day men with everything that goes on four wheels and is not armoured."

They might also have told you (but they did not) that they had not always known the comparative comfort of

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an inspection shed with a corrugated roof and a concrete floor, or of properly made roadways. When the Depot was first opened those girls worked out-doors whatever the weather and the ruts churned by incoming and outgoing vehicles in the soft woodland earth were so deep that the Auxiliaries literally waded ankle-deep from job to job.

Even with improvements work at the Depot was tough, for there is a tremendous amount to be done to each vehicle between the time it is driven in at the gates and driven out again. First the Auxiliaries must drive the vehicle to the maintenance park and place it over an inspection pit. Scrambling into the pit they then make sure that every screw and nut is in place, choose the right type of grease, check the oil levels and see that the batteries are in order. Then the vehicle has to be preserved—sprayed all over the outside and the metal parts all covered with anti-rust preservative so that it may stand up to field conditions whatever the climate. The same girls responsible for the preserving also stencil on the white star of the Liberation Armies before the vehicle is moved on to the kitting department, where it is supplied with various equipment and also with tools—not only the maker's tools such as would be supplied to any civilian motorist, but the "War Department Issues" required by soldiers in the field.

Next comes "outdoor kitting," a section in charge of an A.T.S. sergeant who has a mixed team of girls and men, the men doing all the heavy lifting, for this job includes the fitting of various attachments to the vehicles. Five are kitted at a time and this process takes on an average thirty-five minutes, after which A.T.S. drivers drive them to the "release" park and return with a fresh batch.

As can be imagined, the rush at this Depot before D Day was terrific, and nobody looking at these Auxiliaries wriggling under trucks in their oil-stained dungarees, their faces and hands thick with mud and grease, would have believed they were the same girls who provided the drivers

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for the film "The Gentle Sex"! Yet if you saw them in their rare leisure moments, trim in their Service dress, you realised with astonishment that they were every bit as feminine as the girls you had seen on the screen.

Their officer, a Junior Commander, was one of the first A.T.S. to train as a technical R.A.O.C. officer, and she had a mighty comprehensive job, as she was responsible for all the technical work and had to see that every single vehicle was passed out in perfect order and absolutely on time. Her office was a picturesque log cabin next door to the maintenance sheds, but it was seldom she could be found there as almost all her time was spent supervising the work in sheds or "car parks."

IV

Another important pre-D Day job—and one which was proudly finished ahead of schedule, was done in a Small Arms Depot by Auxiliaries working with R.A.O.C. men. The girls there handled more than 5,000 different items of equipment, from knuckle-dusters to tommy-guns, from Piat anti-tank guns to Commando knives, and packed thousands of these in camouflaged beach landing-kits so skilfully that however roughly handled the kits might be their contents would arrive safe and sound.

In the selection and packing stores the girls chose and packed tiny pistol springs, revolvers, rifles, machine-gun parts—an extremely dirty job as each knife, bayonet or small metal part had to be dipped in greasy anti-rust solution and then wrapped up separately. But trust the A.T.S.! This slimy black liquid was kept in a large tank and the Auxiliaries found it extremely useful as a mirror with the aid of which hair might be kept tidy and even noses powdered.

One girl worked in the Pistol Cage—she used to work in a furniture shop—among the more valuable small weapons, others stencilled code signs on the landing kits,

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The motor transport store. [British Official Photo.

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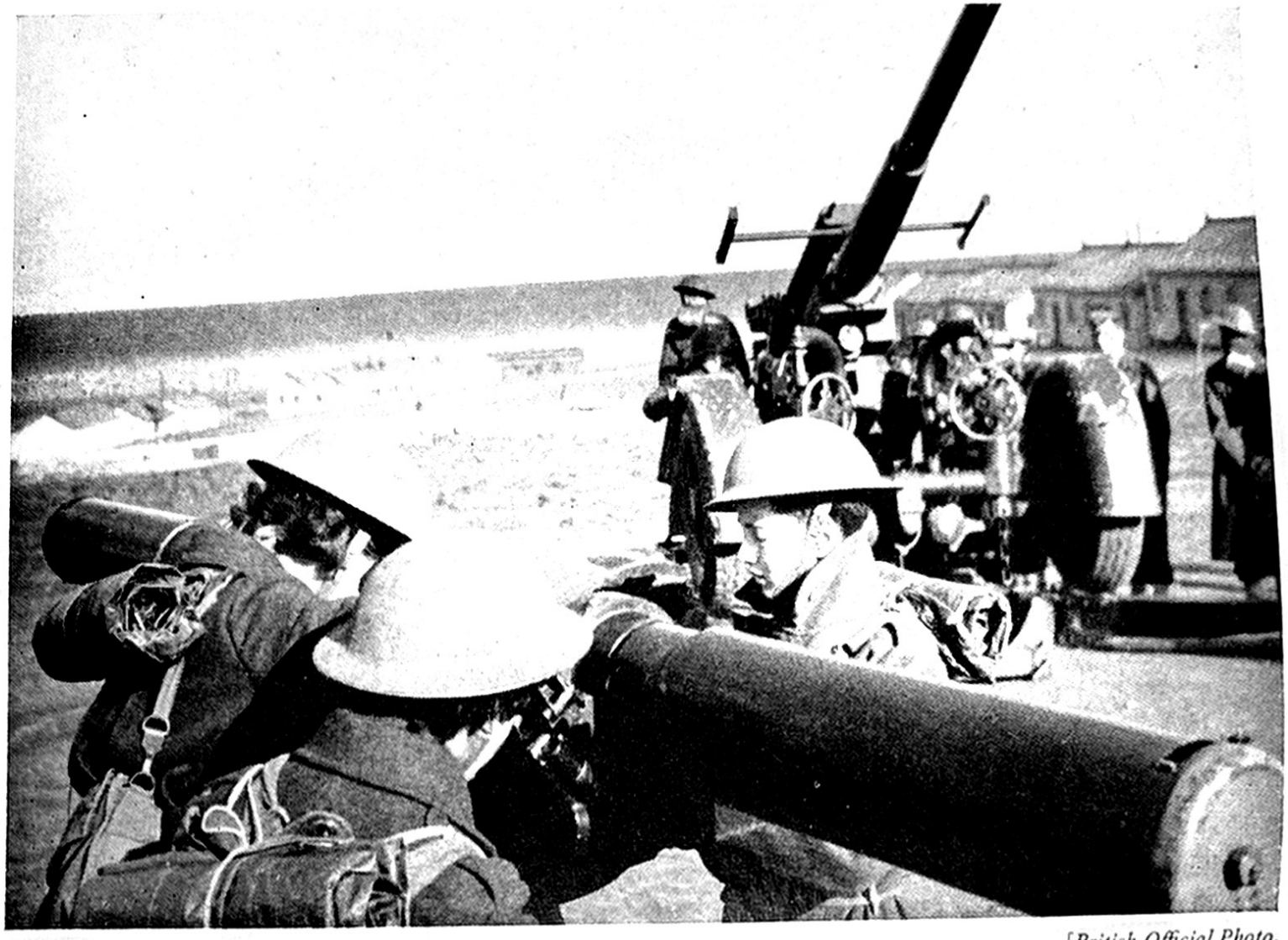

[*British Official Photo.*

Ack-ack girls with a mobile 3.7.

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two or three manned cranes and some whizzed around the Depot at breakneck speed on electric trucks, with strings of laden trailers behind them.

When the rush was at its height the Auxiliaries scorned any feminine privileges. Learning that the men were being called back for night work in order to pack rifles and revolvers they turned up in a body and refused to down tools.

Tough girls, maybe ; but a grand lot. Undeterred by grease, by long hours, by uncomfortable conditions, they worked like Trojans, and at every meal-break in the canteen they organised dances and sing-songs "just to help things along," as one of them said.

V

Thousands of gallons of petrol and oil and millions of spare parts of the equipment necessary for dealing with these commodities had to be issued to our invading Armies, and at a petrol Depot in Eastern Command a group of A.T.S. girls dealt with this work.

If you attended the Army Equipment Exhibition held in Oxford Street, London, in 1943, you may have watched a sergeant A.T.S. giving demonstrations of the use of various machines and different types of containers. She was the girl responsible at this Depot for all the clerical work connected with the issue of petrol, oil and lubricants to our Home Commands, and a most exacting job it was, for thousands of gallons a day had to be supplied to units.

Thousands more gallons had to be sent direct to the ports of embarkation, and Auxiliaries had to check each gallon on arrival at and departure from the Depot, while others unpacked all kinds of machinery as it came in from the factories, checked it and then repacked it. Even after the camp men had transferred the petrol and oil by truck from the nearest railway station and checked

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the quantities in so doing, the girls had to re-check the truck-loads as they passed in at the Depot gates.

In the sheds the Auxiliaries unpacked and checked spare parts, working at lightning speed because the Army could not wait and each day brought yet more urgent requests for them to fulfil ; and outside more Auxiliaries drove an American invention called a "Yo-Yo," a small mobile lifting machine which was extremely useful for the loading and unloading of trucks. They did not complain as they were told to work faster, ever faster. Instead they sang as they worked—were they not helping to move the troops towards the greatest invasion of all time ?

VI

In the R.E.M.E. workshops at this period large numbers of A.T.S. girls were tremendously busy on a variety of tasks. They were especially proud of the fact that since October 1942 they had been entitled to wear the R.E.M.E. shoulder flashes ; the lightning zig-zag of the electrician, the hammer and tongs of the vehicle mechanic, or the horse's bit and chain of the coach trimmer, and in the months before D Day they felt, in their own words, that they were "really getting down to it."

They certainly were. Perhaps in civilian life they had been hairdressers, clerks or shop assistants. Now they wore greasy dungarees and spent their days, rain or shine, taking motor-cycles to pieces and building them up again ; stripping the engines of vehicles from water tankers to light cars, replacing brake-linings, ensuring that the dynamos were in running order ; doing electrical wiring and stripping and repairing magdynamos; mending torn hoods and canopies.

At one Depot was a girl who "knew cars and motor-cycles inside out" (she has post-war political ambitions), and another who worked as a welder and said, "I love it," while a third engaged in electrical repairs talked easily in technical terms that would have been totally

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incomprehensible to her a year before.

In another Depot were the A.T.S. "instrument shop" girls, doing repairs to range-finders, telescopes and optical instruments of various kinds. They had to clean the lenses, check over and repair the mechanical parts and fit new cross-wire sights made out of spider's webs.

This last job called for exceptionally delicate handling. First the webs had to be collected, and this was done by taking the spider (a collection was always available), and dropping it from one hand to the other. As it dropped it spun the fine web, and these had to be attached to metal frames, smeared with shellac and then stored away. When optical instruments required new cross-wire sights the expert Auxiliaries took the frail web from storage and made a new sight by fixing it to a diaphragm between the eye-piece and the object glass.

This was precision work which needed a steady hand and the lightest possible touch and sometimes, when a particularly fine cross-wire was required, the Auxiliary had to split one of the strands of web in two under the microscope.

A further job undertaken by R.E.M.E. Auxiliaries also called for nimble fingers. This was the dismantling, cleaning, repairing and modifying in design of 3,000 portable wireless sets. Each one had to be carefully examined for flaws and soldering had to be done where needed. The apparatus was so delicate that the slightest touch or undue pressure would break it, and it says much for the work of the A.T.S. that only .406 accidents occurred to the whole batch of sets.

In R.E.M.E. as in R.A.O.C., A.T.S. officers were in charge of different departments at different Depots, several of them working as Radio Maintenance Officers, which meant they were responsible for the maintenance, repair and calibration of the Army's secret Radiolocation equipment ; but they were also in charge of other branches of electrical and mechanical engineering by 1944, and their number is steadily increasing now, when they can relieve so many male officers for overseas service.

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VII

A finishing touch to the aid given by the A.T.S. to invasion preparations was that they kept the convoys moving. Down in the West Country, on a wide main road leading to embarkation Depots and ports, two Lancashire Auxiliaries took over the job of "petrol issuers" at what had been an ordinary civilian garage.

Before taking the pool petrol tanks on charge they had to check them for quantity with a dipper, and they then had to take records of all intakes and issues of petrol and oil.

They started their duty each morning at eight o'clock and had six pumps to man. All day long the British and Allied convoys rumbled past, and the girls served all manner of vehicles—jeeps, gun-carriers, staff cars and tank carriers. A big convoy took on an average two whole hours to fill up, and on a record day they issued 4,000 gallons of petrol and oil to the Amy, the R.A.F., and U.S.A. transport. The last-named drew Diesel oil for their biggest vehicles, and at first their drivers were greatly astonished to find girls supplying this.

"But they soon got over that," said one of the Auxiliaries happily. "D'you know what one said to me? He said, 'I guess you're just another guy doing a good job of work.'"

That phrase, I think, was the one above all others which the Auxiliaries helping to prepare for D Day would have liked used to describe them. They were "just other guys doing a good job of work."

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CHAPTER X

THE MERCURY GIRLS

I

THE Mercury Girls are attached to the Royal Corps of Signals and while this branch of the Army has employed women since very early in the war the scope of work open to A.T.S. Signal Companies has grown enormously with the new fronts opened up and the urgent need for men to operate Signal stations overseas, so from small beginnings as switchboard and teleprinter operators the Auxiliaries can now become Operators Special who train as wireless operators and are then employed on special secret duties of much importance, Cipher Operators who encipher and decipher secret messages, Operators Wireless and Line who send and receive wireless messages, and Operators Wireless and Keyboard who transmit and receive "automatic" Morse messages seven times more quickly than can be done by hand.

(It is perhaps superfluous to add that the Wireless and Line girls are known as "Owls" and the Wireless and Keyboard as "Owks.")

The Owls and the Owks have to undergo a fourteen weeks' training at the Headquarters of the Royal Signals Mixed Training Battalion, and many Auxiliaries who are already serving as switchboard or teleprinter operators eagerly volunteered for the new course when it was announced. There are also, however, many new recruits to the Service who possess some training or technical knowledge of wireless who are admitted as well.

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The training is a concentrated and complicated one. First they must learn the Morse Code and how to manipulate the key when sending signals. A curious point is that the Auxiliaries never actually *see* the Morse alphabet written out in a series of dots and dashes. They learn it *entirely by ear*, sitting with their headphones on and listening to the signals sent by the Instructor on his key. Presently they get to the stage of answering the same signal on their own keys, loudly chanting an imitation of the sound as they do so: "da" for dash, "di" for dot—and they work with a will for they know that by the end of the course they must be capable of sending out sixteen words a minute.

They next learn how to operate "pretend" wireless sets, and learn the very strict rules which govern all wireless traffic, such as the one that forbids any station to speak out of turn lest it cause confusion on the ether. During this part of training they learn too to operate and adjust line instruments like the Fullerphone, a standard telegraph instrument employed if secrecy is necessary.

Now they have reached the stage when they may practise on the "spider's web," for the whole training establishment is linked by what is known as a "spider's web" network of signal lines. Therefore the Auxiliaries form into little groups which are scattered all over the house, and they then send Morse messages to each other. Eventually one girl in each group is made the control station through which all signal traffic has to pass, and her job is to hold up some messages and speed up the important ones so that any jam on the air is avoided.

When she comes to working on her own the Auxiliary will find various kinds of interference on the ether, so during training the instructor and the other groups of A.T.S. trainees do the "interfering" by putting unwanted signals received on wireless sets on the line. The instructor also listens in on a "snoop set" and gives advice or correction when required.

Once the Auxiliary is fully conversant with this drill of

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passing and receiving she goes to work on a real wireless set, and all her teaching is aimed at making her so familiar with the set that its operation becomes automatic. When this has been achieved she is able to give more of her attention to important things like the writing of the actual message and the technique of radio-telephony.

Very often work is done out of doors and the groups of Auxiliaries operate just as the men of the Royal Signal Corps have to do in the field.

The training at the Signal "school" is—as is so frequently the wise way of the Army—co-educational; but as a rule the Auxiliaries are taught by a male instructor, while often a class of men is taken by an A.T.S. instructor Only one difference between tuition for men and girls exists : the former do a longer course of twenty-one weeks as they have to learn the full workings of their wireless sets and how to repair them. The girls learn only how to locate external faults, change valves and recharge batteries, and how to test various parts of a line or an instrument.

Then voice production must be studied, for it is necessary to be able to use a microphone correctly, and visual instruction is also used as the walls of the school landing are hung with a set of comic cartoons showing every stage of the passing of a message from which a great deal of serious knowledge may be gained in a very pleasant way. One drawing indeed points a most important moral : it is a warning to any trainee of the dire fate which may befall her should she fail to qualify in her tests. If this should happen then she runs the risk of becoming what signals call a "check," an over-worked and harassed messenger.

Potential Owls and Owks need quick intelligence, a strong gift for accuracy and a scientific brain, and those wise birds who learnt Morse with the Girl Guides or drove their families frantic in the peace-time evenings by their overwhelming interest in the home wireless set now reap their reward.

There are several A.T.S. training schools for Owls and

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Owks scattered throughout the country, but the one of which I write is the only mixed training unit, and if the Auxiliary trainee is bright at her job she stands a grand chance of becoming an instructor for, with more and more men being drafted to the Armies abroad, the entire instructional staff will soon be composed of A.T.S. members. Those who qualify for instructors are sent on to a further course of training as N.C.O.s, and as in one particular month almost two years ago the Signals Mixed Training Battalion required to produce no fewer than eighty A.T.S. technical instructors in one month it may be seen there is plenty of opportunity for the Owl or Owk who sets her heart on quick promotion.

According to one of the officers at the school, the Auxiliaries bring a high degree of imagination to bear on their work as instructors. "They invent Army names, give strange reasons for being unable to connect subscribers, or pretend to be impatient staff officers—all on the spur of the moment." By these means, of course, they test the pupil's ability to think fast, be resourceful, unflurried and always polite. (That last, I feel, must sometimes be the Owl's or Owk's hardest job of all !)

II

Day and night, up and down this country and in several places behind our Army lines on the different fronts, the Owls and Owks are transmitting and receiving vital messages. They have to be always on the alert to detect the infinitesimal differences in the Morse dots and dashes ; they have to separate messages from Allied and enemy services ; they have to remain calm and unflustered when a rush is on and Morse messages pour in through their headphones, or when messages from other stations confuse the one they know to be important, or when the poop-poop-poop of the Morse merges with the background atmospherics into an indecipherable noise.

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Some of these girls kept in touch to the very last moment with the men on Dunkirk beaches, some of them received the final tragic messages from Singapore, some had the unforgettable thrill of receiving the first urgent dramatic messages from the landing forces on D Day. They work in Gun Operation Rooms in Ack-Ack Command, in signals offices at Headquarters Formations, in remote places and in crowded cities, and wherever they work they remember the slogan of the signal school, "*Practise what is preached, and preach as little as possible.*"

III

Only the other day I was privileged to watch the Owls and the Owks at their job in the very nerve centre of our Armies, the War Office Signal Office. They work deep underground not far from Whitehall, in rooms air-conditioned and lit by daylight lighting, and their office handles all communications between the War Office and Army units either at home or overseas except letters and despatches which are dealt with elsewhere. An average of 30,000 messages a week pass through here, including all important operational communications, with the result that an Owl or an Owk thinks no more of sending a message to New Delhi or Moscow than you or I would think of sending an ordinary telegram to Edinburgh.

We went first into a long room where Auxiliaries sat in lines before two rows of teleprinters. These were connected with the huge network of teleprinter lines which cover Great Britain—and next time you want to make a Trunk telephone call remember War Office Signals, for many of their teleprinter lines are G.P.O. wires. At the far end of the room was an enormous switchboard. Everything was very quiet, very orderly. Teleprinters tapped and tapes ticked, and A.T.S. messengers moved to and fro. It was hard to believe that one was watching the transmission and receiving of

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messages of vital importance, but the longer one stayed in the room the more one became aware of a queer alertness in its atmosphere.

"You can talk to the girls if you like," said the Signalmaster, a captain, so rather hesitantly I approached the nearest.

She had worked here for two years. Yes, she liked it, "Makes you feel you're at the centre of things." The only thing was she never knew what the weather was like in the outside world until her shift was over. She answered my questions courteously and was very pleasant to me; but her eyes were kept steadfastly on her teleprinter and I had the feeling she was talking to me with one side of her mind while the other side stayed on her job. I had that feeling when I spoke to any of the Auxiliaries in War Office Signals; they knew they couldn't quite relax until work was done.

"Each of these teleprinters," said the Signalmaster, "is connected with its fellow somewhere else. Look, I'll show you how it works." He walked over to the switchboard and connected two teleprinters in the room which happened to be idle at the moment; then entered into a long and detailed explanation. I am ashamed to say that most of it was Greek to my untutored mind, and out of the corner of my eye I caught a small superior smile from the Auxiliary next to me.

I said to her, "Didn't you find all this terribly muddling at first?"

"Not really. Of course, we took it step by step. It's terrifically interesting when you understand it."

"I'm sure it is. By the way, were you in a job something like this before you joined the A.T.S.?"

She looked a little shocked. "Oh, no, ma'am. I was a hairdresser."

Meekly I turned back to the Signalmaster and tried to absorb his remarks with some degree of intelligence.

He was explaining how it is impossible as yet to work teleprinters by wireless over long distances. "We use wireless telegraph circuits for communications with troops

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further afield, and the important far-off theatres of war are served by high-speed automatic wireless—I'll take you to see that shortly. But with our teleprinters do you know we were working them by wireless to Normandy a few hours after the first landings ? ''

As I passed her the ex-hairdresser murmured, ''You'll *love* the auto-wireless office. My, I'd like to work there !''

Our next visit, however, was to the ''routing'' room, where dozens of Auxiliaries and Signalmen were handling messages which had been sent down for transmission from the Cipher Office. Each message was timed and registered by a signals clerk, who knew the various routes by which it might go and also what to do if the normal service to be employed was congested or temporarily out of order, and it was his or her job to send it on the next stage of its journey to one of the teleprinter rooms or to the auto-wireless room. Here, again, there was a complete absence of fuss, and despite the sheaves of messages which seemed to be passing to and fro everybody seemed to know exactly their own part of the work.

''Now you must see the pneumatic tubes,'' said the Signalmaster. ''We use them for inter-office work instead of messengers.''

The tubes were fascinating. They were run on exactly the same principle as the tubes by means of which certain shops whiz one's change and receipt up and down between counting-house and counter, only in shops they do not *lock* the tubes and in War Office Signals they do, lest some highly secret message go astray or fall into the wrong hands.

Swiftly the Auxiliaries inserted the rolled messages into the tubes, snapped the locks shut with Yale keys and sent the tubes whizzing through the pipes which carried them to their destination, while other girls caught the tubes continually tumbling out of the pipes, unlocked them, took out the messages and pushed them through a hatch to the ''routing'' room.

''Now we'll go and see the teleprinters working to the nearer parts of France,'' said the Signalmaster.

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To my uninitiated eye there seemed remarkably little difference between the appearance of this room and the Home Stations teleprinter room, but when we at length moved on to the high-speed auto-wireless room I knew a real thrill of excitement.

Here we were at the end of the wireless chain linking the General Staff in this country with all the numerous theatres of war. All outgoing messages were again timed and registered as the tubes decanted them into this room and were then handed to the A.T.S. operators who were working the keyboards of perforating machines very similar to those used in newspaper offices. These machines reproduced the messages on a tape perforated with holes so arranged that the intervals between them represented the dots and dashes of the Morse code, and this tape was then fed into Wheatstone transmitters which were directly connected with a high-power wireless station in the country, through which the messages were transmitted at the rate of about a hundred words a minute to their distant destinations, where they were picked up by Mobile Royal Signal Stations and re-perforated by machines which produced exact replicas of the original tapes punched so short a time previously by the A.T.S. operators in London. Then the tapes were fed into printing machines which produced the messages in printed characters—still, of course, in cipher—at the rate of about eighty words a minute. Finally, the messages passed through the Army Signals Office to the Cipher Office and the deciphered versions delivered under secret covers.

All this and more the Signalmaster told me as we watched the girls in the auto-wireless room at work. He also, most kindly, gave me a typewritten copy of his speech, which I have quoted above practically verbatim, it being quite beyond my powers to understand such wonders fully myself. Indeed, to me that auto-wireless room savoured of magic. It seemed incredible that the meaningless jumble of cipher which the Auxiliary just in front of me was tapping out on her perforating machine

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should be being deciphered somewhere in, say, Italy, within a very few minutes. Yet it was true, and without these supernatural devices the modern Army could not hope to get along.

"Sometimes we get errors," said the Signalmaster. "This girl is looking for an error which occurred in an incoming message."

She was bent above her desk, yard after yard of perforated tape passing swiftly through her hands. Personally, I couldn't see any difference in the spaces between the holes, but she read the stuff as I would read my A B C. Presently she straightened and said "Ah !" in a satisfied voice.

"Show me," said the Signalmaster, and she passed the piece of tape up to him.

"Oh, yes," he nodded ; then turned to me. "We get remarkably few mistakes but the system is not infallible."

I asked the Auxiliary, "Does it take you very long to find one if it does occur ? "

"Oh, yes, sometimes when we have to go through an awful lot of tape before we find it. It's a wearisome job, too, very trying to the eyes. Oh, but the thrill you get when you find the error is worth all your trouble !"

"How long have you been down here ?"

"Eighteen months. It's great fun when you get used to it, though I miss the fresh air because I was brought up on a farm in the country. Still, I like the feeling that I'm sending fearfully important messages to the different Army Commanders."

I glanced up above her head to a glass sign which hung from the ceiling. On it was printed "New Delhi," and all up and down the vast room hung similar signs, "S.H.A.E.F.," "Brussels," "Italy," "Cairo," "Washington," "Chungking" . . .

"Yes," I said slowly, "I'm sure you like the feeling."

At that moment I would have given all I possessed to be twenty years younger and working in War Office Signals.

The Chief Signalmaster beckoned me. "There's a High

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Priority outgoing message coming through. Immediately it is received from Cipher it is shown to a Signalmaster, who switches on red lights in the Signal Office and in here, (or the teleprinter room if it's going by teleprinter). These warn everybody of what's happening. Now the perforators and transmitters must be cleared of other traffic —that's all got to wait until this 'hot' message has been cleared to its destination and acknowledged.''

''And if it's an *incoming* Priority,'' the A.T.S. sergeant told me, ''the first combination of letters on the printing machine show the Superintendent here the degree of Priority. If it is very high he switches on white lights in his own room and in the Signals Office, and personally supervises its reception and its delivery to the Signal Office. He doesn't switch the lights off again until the message is safely in the pneumatic tube on its way to be deciphered.''

As we walked up the long room again the Chief Signalmaster told me that Owls and Owks were working overseas. ''I think they man one of the Middle East Signal Stations, too, don't they ? '' he asked the sergeant.

''I think so, sir.'' Then she added with a broad grin, ''If they're not doing so yet they'll be doing so jolly soon !''

I stood and chatted to her for a time. She was small and very spry, and she had been in War Office Signals since the dark days when nothing went right and Rommel menaced Alexandria.

''You must have known some hectic times down here?''

''Ah, we've had our days—and nights ; but it's a queer thing, you know. It must be because we're below ground, sort of shut off from the rest of life, but even before D Day when everything in the place was buzzing we never got that sense of urgent speed we'd have got if we'd been working in an ordinary office. Just as well, I dare say.''

''And the girls don't find it a strain working here ?''

She shook her head. ''Sometimes they moan about living like troglodytes, but that's just a bit of a grouse.

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In reality they're fearfully proud of being here—and so they ought to be. Don't forget we're allowed to wear 'Jimmy.' ''

''Who or what on earth is 'Jimmy'?''

She laughed, and pointed to the Royal Signal Corps ''Hermes'' badge on her jacket. ''We call him 'Jimmy' and we wouldn't give him up for all the tea in China. Mind you, the night shift's trying—ten hours; but that only comes one week in every three. The morning shift is only six hours, from eight till two, and the afternoon eight, from two till ten.''

''Do you go back to your billets for meals while you're on duty?''

''No, they're too far away and, besides, it would be a drag for the girls, waiting about for transport and so on. But we've got a nice little canteen and rest-room all to ourselves upstairs. You'll see it on the way out. And as well as our main meal on shift we take it in turns to go up for a short break, when we can have tea or cocoa and buns.''

An Auxiliary messenger whisked past us carrying a sheaf of messages. The underground offices were warm and, like most of the girls, she had discarded her tunic and wore a thin khaki sweater over her blouse and skirt. On the left breast of the sweater I caught sight of a design with the letters D.R. entwined above it. ''Do you have Auxiliary Despatch Riders here?''

''Goodness no, ma'am! That only means she's got a boy friend who's one.''

The Chief Signalmaster cut in, ''Ah, but you ought to see the inside of their tunics! On the left side, just above the heart—*that's* the place they carry the boy friend's insignia.''

So romance blossomed even in this hidden office far below the earth's surface.

But as I made my way upstairs I thought, ''I bet they'd rather give up all the badges of all the boy friends rather than give up 'Jimmy.' ''

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CHAPTER XI

And Still They Drive

I

In the very early days of the A.T.S. before the outbreak of war, the driving of motor vehicles of various descriptions from ambulances to staff cars was one of the few Army employments open to its members. To the public, driving seemed—heaven knows why !—an infinitely more suitable job for women if they *had* to go chasing off on this wild-cat scheme of helping the Army in a war that might never arise than the job of cook, or orderly, or even clerk. "So-and-so's used to driving her own car," they said complacently, or "Such-and-such has always driven her father to his office," and left it at that.

It never occurred to them that spinning along a pleasant English road studded with garages, petrol pumps, A.A. men, R.A.C. men and police was a very different matter from driving a two-ton truck in the blackout, or riding a motor-cycle across the North of Scotland in a blizzard.

Perhaps their ignorance of what the M.T. driver in the A.T.S. might be called upon to do was all to the good—it saved endless ructions.

So the M.T. drivers began their job. Over six years later they're still at it and going strong, although probably they are the most consistently hard-worked women in the Service. They've driven through blitzes, they've driven slap into German convoys, they've driven across the African desert, they've driven in Italy, they've driven

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The Kine-Theodolite operators. [*British Official Photo.*

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Field wireless operators in training. [*British Official Photo.*

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along the famous "Red Ball" road of Northern France in the wake of our advancing Armies.

And now they are even driving towards Berlin—for you can't stop an M.T. driver once she's got her head.

And in the past five years they've driven a whole lot of things besides ambulances and staff cars—they've driven everything non-armoured that goes on wheels and is used by the British Army ; trucks, lorries, jeeps, they're all the same to the M.T. driver.

She's used to all weathers, too. After all, she drove both in England and France in that first icy winter of the war, she drove in Egypt and Kenya under the hot tropic sun, she drove through the warm breathless days of 1944 when D Day showed on the horizon, she drove on the "Red Ball" in the pelting autumn rain, she drove through the snowdrifts of the 1944-45 winter. If you asked her to drive you to the North Pole she'd probably give a cheery grin and set out without a murmur, for that's the sort of girl she is ; she takes it all and says nothing after the manner of Brer Rabbit.

Like Brer Rabbit, too, she "lies low." The most difficult thing in the world is to drag from one of the M.T. drivers any sort of information concerning her manifold experiences. "Oh, well," she'll say deprecatingly, "we did drive from Inverness to London in so many hours—but it was nothing really . . ." and then she'll change the subject and leave you flat.

"It's just a job," is her favourite phrase, and she uses it whatever risks and hardships her journey may have entailed ; but I've at last discovered the way to make her open up. Ask her if she remembers Mary Smith who drove in the same convoy with her from Glasgow to Cardiff in 1940 and she'll beam at you. "Oh, Mary Smith, she was simply grand. D'you know what she did . . . .?" Having got that story you go on to Mary Smith and ask her if *she* remembers Joan Brown (who is the first girl you were talking to), and you'll hear things the redoubtable Miss Brown would rather die than tell you herself. Maybe it's a Machiavellian method,

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but it's the only way you'll ever get any information out of M.T. drivers.

II

Perhaps the finest concerted effort of the M.T. drivers happened just after Dunkirk. As everybody knows, the Army was forced to abandon weapons, armour, transport, everything. They returned to England wounded, sick, dog-weary and the M.T. drivers met them. Tirelessly, without thought of the strain they were putting on themselves, those girls drove the soldiers from the ports of disembarkation to hospitals, to Depots, to their homes. Up and down the country they trailed, snatching meals or snacks when opportunity offered, stopping and starting in the long snaky convoys or driving alone in the blackout through districts they did not know—but they got the men to their destinations.

And having got them there the problem of fresh transport for all the reassembling units arose. From the various Ordnance Depots the M.T. drivers set forth once more, this time with new vehicles of all descriptions to refit the Army with transport. Girls who had never driven anything bigger than a small car found themselves perched in the cab of a two-ton truck ; girls who had never seen a Bren gun carrier discovered all the joys and perils of riding in one—but the Army got its new transport.

Some of the journeys made by the M.T. drivers that summer must have been sheer hell. A great deal of the work involved night-driving, often the vehicles broke down, help was impossible to get and generally they would be many hours.on the road. They never complained—it was "just a job "

Very few people knew anything of their experiences for a long time afterwards. I myself was quite well acquainted with one of those drivers, and when I was talking to her a good while after Dunkirk I suddenly noticed she had a ribbon up.

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"Where did you get that ?"

She said she couldn't quite remember. The look in her eye said, "Ask me another word about it and I'll never speak to you again !"

III

One group of M.T. drivers worked the London docks all through the worst of the blitzes. It was night work, driving down in convoy to pick up Army stores from the ships or the dock warehouses. If there didn't happen to be a raid on the darkness was so Stygian that they never knew when they might be teetering on the dockside and the least touch on the accelerator might send them hurtling into the dock-basin. If there was a raid on it was ten to one that Jerry was going for the docks and that the entire convoy might be blown sky-high at any minute.

"It was a bit chancy," said one of them.

And another said, "I never minded if I was with B——. She was so extraordinarily calm. I'd be absolutely having kittens, but she'd be perfectly serene."

I pricked up my ears. "*Who* did you say ?"

She told me again and I blinked in bewilderment. I knew quite well the girl of whom she spoke. Since the blitz days she has won promotion and now holds an important War Office job with great efficiency and a Senior Commander's crown on her shoulder. In all the times I had talked to her she had never mentioned having been a driver. Brer Rabbit again !

IV

Every M.T. driver has to service her own vehicle and keep it in first-class running order. She is allowed to

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drive lorries and trucks up to and including three tons and, if she was not one of the pioneer drivers of the early days, she learns her job thoroughly at a Driver Training Centre during a ten weeks' course, which includes a thorough grounding in maintenance. If she shows a decided bent for mechanics she can have special teaching which will enable her to pass the trade tests for Driver-Mechanic, in which case she will receive trade rates of pay. She also has the opportunity of qualifying eventually as an A.T.S. Driver Instructor.

Alternatively the budding M.T. driver may receive training as an A.T.S. Motor cyclist, a job which also involves long hours, snatched meals and, in addition, much slithering about on greasy roads. A tremendous amount of valuable and vital work is now being done by these Auxiliaries, and despite the hardness of the work few express any wish to change their category.

Perhaps nowadays the M.T. jobs are not quite so gruelling as they were before, say, 1942. The Service as a whole has grown so enormously and experience has brought improved organisation. Yet no amount of organisation can avoid "rush" periods, or the possibility of breakdowns, or ensure balmy weather all the year round. Before D Day I met a group of M.T. drivers who had, as they put it, "moved South with the Army," and their faces were grey with tiredness for their convoy had been on the go since daybreak. Not that they minded. They were supremely cheerful and in love with their work, and I thought as I looked at them that they shared in some mysterious manner the spirit which had carried the pioneer drivers through thick and thin five long years before. They shared something else with them, too, a quiet comradeship unlike any in other branches of the Service, good though those other comradeships undoubtedly are. And if you asked them anything about their work they answered in the same words as did their forerunners, "Oh, well, it's just a job."

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CHAPTER XII

"UNWILLINGLY TO SCHOOL"

I

THROUGH the window of the Chief Instructor's office floated the sound of several voices singing, but it seemed rather dreary singing, not in the least like the usual full-throated song of the A.T.S. girls.

"*We joined the Royal Artillery . . .*"

I poked my head out and saw a party of about twenty-five Auxiliaries trudging down the drive. Surely even the bitter weather could not account for their tuneless droning or the way they hunched their shoulders inside their greatcoats?

The Chief Instructor sighed. "Ack-Acks," she said. "They're fed to the back teeth because they've been taken off operations and sent here to the Clerks' Training School. Poor dears, I do feel for them. They just can't see that (*a*) the Army must have more clerks and more clerks, and (*b*) that curiously enough they'll probably find the variety of jobs open to them after their training far more interesting and far more likely to lead them to where they want to go overseas than the ones they've just left."

My sympathies were all with the ex-Ack-Acks. I didn't feel I'd enjoy it at all myself if I were transplanted from a gun-site to a clerks' school and I said so.

The Chief Instructor looked reproachful. "*I* know,

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to you a clerk is just a clerk. Don't you realise there are fifteen different sorts of clerk in the Army? Don't you know how fearfully important it is that records and pay and documents and hundreds of other things should be kept in apple-pie order? Don't you see what invaluable chances clerks have for fitting themselves for post-war employment?''

I hadn't understood the least thing about Army clerking hitherto; but in the next several hours I was to learn a lot.

To begin with, the term ''clerking'' in the Army is a misnomer. (In civilian life an accountant or an archive-keeper would be rightly indignant if you called him a clerk.) Anybody who has anything whatever to do with books, papers, typewriters, duplicators, or even maps in the Army comes automatically under the heading of clerk, although his or her activities may be far removed from what the ordinary man considers as a clerk's employment.

But the Chief Instructor was well away on her pet hobby-horse. ''As you know, every fit man is needed for active service; therefore the A.T.S. must provide an Auxiliary to take his place. Well, clerking in its many aspects is a job which women can do, and it's up to us to do it. Just think how important it is that the man in the field has all his documents in order, that he gets his pay promptly and that his wife or other dependants receive their allowances promptly. Look at the Records Offices, how many people they require, and the typists that are needed.''

''Ye-es, but it still sounds a bit dull—especially after Ack-Ack.''

She rose briskly. ''You'd better come round and see the school for yourself. Then you'll learn just how interesting the courses are.''

Most surprisingly she was right. By the end of the morning I had discovered many things about the school which were positively fascinating, and what is more I had found that although the ex-Ack-Acks ''came unwillingly to school'' in the first place, they settled down extremely happily after a week or two.

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Indeed, I came to the conclusion that the Clerks' Training School was the best possible training ground for the Auxiliary who had to earn her living after the war.

We went first to the typing classes. In one room were thirty or forty girls who had joined the school only the previous day. They were sitting squinting rather dubiously at their machines while an A.T.S. sergeant instructor explained the rudiments of touch-typing with the aid of a chart and her own very persuasive voice. Even as I watched I saw a glimmer of interest flicker across several faces and by the end of half an hour at least 75 per cent. of the girls were definitely trying their hardest to "play" the keys as one plays a piano.

"You're right," I whispered, as we slid out of the room. "They're coming round to it."

"Not yet," said the Chief Instructor. "They'll practically all be asking for interviews with the Commandant within the next three or four days, and they'll say they can't stick it and that they feel typing is the end of all things. Then we have the same old arguments all over again and in about a week's time they'll perk up and forget their troubles because they've really become interested in the course. Have a look at this more advanced class. They've been here a fortnight."

The spirit of that class sounded in the firm tap-tap on thirty keyboards. The girls sat alert and upright, and their faces shone with interest. When I asked them questions they answered by telling me what speed they could do, and one and all assured me that accuracy was the thing to aim at.

"Do you possess a magic wand or what ?" I demanded of the Chief Instructor. "Such a change in a fortnight savours of necromancy."

"Nonsense. It's a little tact allied to the fact that they've had time to find out that the work is really taking them somewhere and that we don't bite. We do a lot by reiteration here, you know. We tell them gently day after day what a grand job they're learning and how much it is going to help the men. Almost all of them

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have somebody in the war, and if they think they can end it quicker by becoming clerks then they're all for it.''

In the next room we entered a senior clerks' class was in progress.

''They're doing map-reading. Of course, if it were anything like decent weather they'd be doing the job in a practical way out of doors. However, we're doing our best to make the indoor job interesting by organising a treasure-hunt.''

The Auxiliaries were treasure-hunting in couples. Before each pair was spread a large and detailed map of an English county, and upon this they were tracing a very involved route with the help of a page of clues which were written in very witty rhyme invented by one of the instructors. One couple sat back looking like cats that had swallowed canaries and said smugly that they ''had finished,'' but I fear they were in for a rude awakening, as they had misread two most important clues and ignored a third. The other twenty-eight heads in the room were bent over the maps.

That class was made as entertaining as it is possible for a class to be on any given subject. The clues not only made the girls chuckle but wove the whole treasure-hunt into an interesting and exciting story ; the route was full of traps and catches ; the time-limit given was close enough to make people hustle their brains in order to reach their journey's end before the instructor demanded the maps back.

Incidentally, it seemed to me a most excellent method of teaching sound map-reading, while on a bench behind me was an even better way of teaching contour-reading. It was done by means of various small sheets of glass and a lot of little wooden blocks. The first sheet of glass had on it the outline of the base of a mountain as it would appear on any contour map. You placed a wooden block at each corner of this and surmounted them by the second sheet of glass, which bore a smaller outline of the same shape. So with glass and blocks, glass and blocks, you built up a very creditable imitation of the mountain as it

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actually was and thus taught the pupil to read contours.

Seeing that my prejudices against clerking were dying the Chief Instructor bore me off in triumph to see a shorthand class, again of girls who had just come to the school. They looked as dismal as had the beginnner typists, but when we went across the hall to a more advanced class the same brightening of the general atmosphere was apparent.

"How long do they stay here?"

"It depends upon which course they choose, but at the very minimum three weeks, while most take longer courses."

"And how many do you have altogether at one time?"

"About four to five hundred. We should like to take more, as the Army want as many clerks as we can give them, but one of our greatest difficulties is finding enough instructors. As it is, we're all kept terrifically busy. Still, it's a fascinating job."

Before the war the Chief Instructor had been what she herself called "an ordinary married woman," but in the past five and a half years she had certainly amassed an amazing amount of knowledge concerning the various forms of Army clerking. What was more, she was possessed of a quick sympathy which endeared her even to the most unwilling pupil in the school.

II

A little later I sat in the Commandant's office and got to know more about her establishment.

"We were up in the North of Scotland, but we moved South bodily a year or two ago. I'm never sure whether I'm glad or sorry. Of course, being near London is far more convenient from the administration point of view, because units can get hold of us quickly when they want clerks, and we in turn can send all our test results and marks up to the War Office easily. But our girls are

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billeted in nineteen different houses and all last summer we suffered rather heavily from flying bomb raids round here—and in a training school those are not so good as, naturally, they stop the students from concentrating on their work. Then London has a great attraction for the average girl in her off-duty periods. The minute she is free off she bustles, and sometimes she spends so much energy in enjoying herself that she's not much good for work the following morning.''

I said I was impressed by the way in which the Auxiliaries settled down, although they arrived determined to dislike everything.

She smiled. ''They require quite a bit of handling sometimes, especially at the moment. I suppose you've been told that about 90 per cent. of our present pupils have come from Ack-Ack batteries ? They arrive feeling extremely sore and one doesn't blame them, for after all most of them have seen active service, and becoming a clerk seems very small beer after that ! They've heard, too, that some of their late colleagues are now serving with mixed Ack-Ack batteries on the Continent, and can't see why they shouldn't have been able to join them. I find it exceedingly difficult to explain to them that there isn't nearly room enough for all of them. I know they've been doing a grand job, but I do think a little bit of their chagrin springs from the fact that they are no longer the much publicised, the glamour girls of the Service.''

''M'm, and that's a very hurtful thing to the young, that sudden casting down from what you feel is a high estate.''

''Exactly. I usually start by reminding them that the majority of them haven't been in action for a considerable time, and that surely it is better to start learning a job which will help the Army now and themselves afterwards than kick their heels on some isolated gun-site with precious little to do. (To be truthful, I think we saw more enemy activity here with flying bombs than they've seen for over a year.) If my first argument doesn't work then

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I try to make them see how they can help the men by taking over their clerical jobs. Sometimes my reasoning rings a bell ; sometimes it doesn't, but as a rule the Chief Instructor and I between us can persuade them at least to give the course a fair trial.''

''But surely you can't see *all* of them personally ?''

''Oh, yes, each one has a separate interview when she can put forward all her arguments and objections—that's only right. Also it gives me an opportunity to see what we can do to ease matters if they're acutely miserable. You have to remember that apart from their feelings towards the school there is the physical angle. Most of these girls have been living tough in the open air for two or more years and they definitely feel a sort of claustrophobia when they're suddenly shut up in classrooms for several hours each day. We try to break things up as much as possible with P.T. and treasure-hunts and so forth, but it's difficult when they have so many classes and lectures to cram into a short space of time.''

''Yes, I can well understand they don't appreciate being ' cribb'd, cabined and confined.' ''

''Well, there are other ways in which one can ease that feeling. We promise them that if they will settle down to the course and do their best to pass the tests, then we will do *our* best to post them to wherever they wish to go. We make it clear that we can't actually promise to send them near their homes, but as a rule we do manage to send them to a place which is served by the same main line as their home and not too far distant from it. Failing that, we try to arrange that two friends are posted to the same unit so that they shan't feel so lonely.''

''I had no idea you went to all that trouble.''

''Oh, dear me, yes ! The hours I spend with maps and railway guides mount up considerably—but it's well worth it. You'll always find the contented Auxiliary will work ten times better than her unhappy sister.''

''Do you get many—well, 'problem children ' ? ''

''A small percentage, and in most cases you can be sure

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that there is something at the back of the problem which, if you can drag it out into the light of day, will disappear. We had an example not long ago of a girl on the permanent staff. She was all right when she was posted here, but gradually she grew nervy and depressed, and then she took to having crying bouts. I had her in here several times but couldn't make much headway until at last one day she came out with the whole story. She had married at the beginning of the war and her husband was taken prisoner before Dunkirk, so she thought the best thing she could do was to join the A.T.S. I think she felt that her effort might help to end the war all the sooner and get her man back. The trouble was that when she wrote and told her prisoner husband what she had done he didn't take kindly to the idea at all ! He was so angry that he gave up writing to her altogether, and she had to get news of him through his mother. So we wrote to him, explaining what she had been too frightened and sad to do, exactly why she had joined the Service. Once he understood that she had really done so in an effort to help him he wrote her at once. Now everything in the garden is lovely and she is one of the best girls we have."

She told me then of some sadder and less curable problems of the kind one is bound to find in a huge body of women over 200,000 strong. Most of these had nothing whatever to do with the A.T.S. ; they were rather a terrible indictment against the conditions under which the particular girls had been reared. Bad family histories, youth spent in crowded slum dwellings, lack of employment before the war resulting in evil habits—all these things and many more were the root causes of trouble.

What did impress me was the infinite care expended by the A.T.S. officers on each case. Very genuinely they wanted to help the girls and not to hinder them, and usually they succeeded in breaking down the barrier of prejudice, the inferiority complex, or the plain sulkiness which stood in the way of a girl becoming a useful and happy member of the Service.

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III

That afternoon I visited more classrooms, and I also chatted to the disconsolate group of trainees who had been reminding each other they had "joined the Royal Artillery" earlier in the day.

"If we thought we were *doing* something by coming here we wouldn't mind so much," said one.

"Stuffy rooms all day and people saying 'don't do this' all the time," said another.

"I wanted to go to France," said a third. "Two of my girl-friends have gone and they write and tease me no end. It's jolly unfair. If they can go, why can't I?"

I had neither the training nor the patience of the Commandant and the Chief Instructor. All I could do was to feel hopelessly inadequate and murmur platitudes —which I should have hated had I been in their stead.

Just then the Quartermaster beckoned me. "You've struck them at their very worst moment. Come upstairs to my office and I'll show you why."

Her floor was piled knee-deep with the specially issued Ack-Ack kit they had just handed in. Not for a very long time have I seen anything quite so pathetic as those heaps of gum-boots, "pants, long, for the use of," leather jerkins, leather anklets, heavy gloves and thick sweaters. It was bad enough to be taken off your job and sent to a training school, but to give up the kit of which you had been so proud! That surely was more than youth could be expected to bear?

The Quartermaster saw my expression. "Don't worry. In another four or five days they'll have forgotten their sorrows and be arguing with each other about touch-typing or how you work the duplicator machine. It's marvellous how they adapt themselves."

"I agree, but it doesn't help present agony. Oh, well, may I look around your stores? They look good to me."

Her shelves were filled with neatly folded garments— shirts, pyjamas, vests, brassieres, corset belts, stockings, ties, all of excellent quality.

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"And how often do they get replacements ?"

"That really depends on the individual, for some girls wear their things out far more quickly than others. But they have to hand in any articles for which they want a replacement and prove to me that they've done their best to mend it before I'll play. By the way, have you seen over the Auxiliaries' quarters yet ?"

I had not, so I followed her into a spotlessly clean bedroom with five beds in it. On each bed were neatly rolled blankets with tin hats perched on them, and from each bed-rail hung a pair of brown Service shoes polished as I have seldom seen shoes polished. The Quartermaster picked one up and showed it to me.

"Look at this," and she ran her finger down a crack in the upper. "The Auxiliary this belongs to is an absolute nailer on polishing her shoes. She'll take months achieving a really fine glossy surface and then she simply can't bear to hand in the shoes even if they're obviously worn. I've been trying to get her to give these in for the past few months—not a bit of it, she'd rather suffer wet feet !"

I peered in at the ablution block which was also extremely well kept, looked at three more bedrooms and decided that so far as cleanliness in the home was concerned the A.T.S. were hard to beat, and walked into the next door house—which was given up to classrooms, and sought out the soldier who repaired and maintenanced the typewriters.

He was hard at work repairing one and shook his head at me as I walked into his little room.

"Varmints, these girls are—thump, thump, thumpin' away at these poor machines until they're fit to come to pieces in your hand. I'll have this one in apple-pie order by tonight and I'm willing to bet any money I'll have it in again by the end of the week."

"I expect the men are just as bad when they're learning to type," I told him. "All beginners are apt to ill-treat their typewriters."

"Nobody could be as heavy-handed as these A.T.S.,"

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he snorted. "I've been working on Army typewriters the past twenty years and never have I seen typewriters in a state like these." Then he put down his tools and leaned confidentially across the table. "D'you hear about that buzz-bomb back in last summer that dropped a few yards from one of our houses ?"

"Yes, the Commandant mentioned it."

"My, you never saw anything like it! A Sunday morning it was and pouring wet. It would be a Sunday, wouldn't it ? Only day those poor girls don't need to get up and march down the road to their breakfast. The roof came in on top of them and the windows came in alongside them, and they were that smothered in rubble and glass you could scarce see them. But did they mind ? Not a bit of it ! Started singing away as if they'd just won a present off the Christmas tree. They shoved on some clothes and began sweeping up the mess and salvaging all their goods and chattels just as if being bombed out was something that happened every morning. Even when the Commandant came down and ordered them all to quit the house at once they argue-bargued with her about how they could manage and they were quite happy. Talk about guts ! Why, none of them ever turned a hair !"

I couldn't resist a dig. "But they're heavy-handed with their typewriters !"

He flourished a chisel at me. "An' what's that got to do with guts ?" he demanded.

IV

I walked back to the Chief Instructor's office and told her of this interview.

"Ah, he loves his A.T.S. really, but he won't admit it except in moments of stress. He's one of about seven men we have on the strength here to do repair jobs of various kinds and so on. They were all up in Scotland with us, and when word came through that we were to

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be moved South they got in such an agitated state at thought of being parted from us that we managed to get permission to bring them with us. As the transport wallah said, 'I've heard of soldiers taking their women-folk along with them, but I've never heard of an A.T.S. establishment taking its soldiers along with it.' They're wonderful old boys and would do anything in the world for the Auxiliaries, although they'd rather die than admit that."

For the rest of the afternoon I sat and listened in at interviews. One girl wanted to take the senior clerk's course (which is a pretty stiff one not long open to A.T.S. personnel), but lacked the necessary confidence. Watching the Senior Instructor instilling that confidence was interesting. She did the job so quietly, so gracefully, that you could hardly tell she was doing it at all, but the effect upon the Auxiliary was little short of magical and she walked out of the room with head high and arms swinging, obviously convinced that she was going to be the best senior clerk the Army had ever known.

But most of the interviews that day concerned possible service overseas and I was both astonished and gratified to hear girl after girl put in a request to be sent abroad, for when you have spent so much of your life as I have exhorting the young to go out and see the world it is pleasant to find that a lot of them want to do so.

"We had a hundred and fifty volunteers last month alone," said the Chief Instructor.

"I'm very glad to hear it. I imagined the girls might jib at thoughts of discomforts, and being so far away from home, and—if they should be sent to a hot climate, the insects and creepy-crawlies ?"

"No, they're strangely sensible—far more so than our generation ever were, taken all round. Of course, you must remember most of them have a sneaking hope they'll be sent somewhere near their men-folk who are serving abroad. But even if that hope breaks down they'll still want to go. In fact, the hope of overseas service is one of our trump cards when we're doing our poor best to

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Blood transfusion orderlies. [*British Official Photo.*

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Despatch riders. [British Official Photo.

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popularise the idea of becoming an Army clerk ! ''

''I should have thought that all the men these girls are releasing for foreign service would be sufficient ? ''

'' Not nowadays, with the bulk of our Armies out of this country. The cry all the time is clerks, clerks, clerks. It's time I went over to the Pay Office and saw how things are going there. We've got a lot of girls passing out today.''

I walked with her and was pleasantly intrigued to find that each girl received, besides whatever pay was due to her and her travel warrant, a small sum in cash with which to buy herself a hot drink during her journey.

'' It's all graded,'' said a Pay clerk. ''So much if your journey is four hours, more if it is six, and so on.''

''I see, kind of fourpence as far as Crewe and sixpence to Manchester ? ''

''Where's so-and-so ? '' inquired the Chief Instructor. ''She has to go to the chiropodist at five o'clock, she complained of a corn yesterday.''

I said, ''I've suffered from corns for years but nobody ever suggested sending me to a chirpodist just like that.''

''Ah, but you're not in the A.T.S. ! Corn—off to the chiropodist ! Toothache—off to the dentist ! Sore throat—off to the doctor ! ''

We were joking, yet I knew that what she said was true. The physical well-being of Auxiliaries is looked after extraordinarily well and the smallest ailment sent for cure.

Sure enough the corn-victim limped in a few minutes later and brightened visibly when told of the appointment which had been made on her behalf. To me she said half wistfully, ''I wouldn't have dreamed of going to have a wee thing like a corn seen to in Civvy Street. It would have seemed too extravagant, wouldn't it ? ''

I nodded agreement and thought that after the war she and many another girl might miss the various small and delicate attentions vouchsafed to its servants by that much grumbled at body, the British Army.

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V

When we returned to the house which served as Head-quarters a row of girls was lined up in the hall outside the Adjutant's office. Everyone was excited and also a shade tremulous, and when the Chief Instructor came in she was greeted with wails of, "Oh, ma'am, I don't want to leave"; "Ma'am, couldn't we stay another week?"; "Will they let us come back sometime for a refresher course, ma'am?"

Nobody seemed in the least desirous to leave the school, which I thought was a great tribute to the Commandant and her Instructors, but I really was startled when the Adjutant whispered to me, "You realise, don't you, that *all* these girls were in Ack-Ack before they came here?"

So those who came "unwillingly to school" departed equally unwillingly! I stood turning this fact over in my mind while farewells were being said. Then the Auxiliaries marched out and down the drive. Their footsteps rang out on the hard frosty ground and they began to sing, but this time their voices were strong and buoyant:

"*We joined the Royal Artillery . . .*"

In the process of becoming clerks they had regained self-respect.

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CHAPTER XIII

Normandy and Beyond

I

D Day plus Fifty-two is a date which the A.T.S. will always remember and cherish, for it is the date on which the first Auxiliaries to serve overseas with the British Liberation Army landed in France, a small party consisting of an officer, an M.T. driver, fourteen shorthand-typists and two "Redcaps" who were to be attached to the advance section of Field-Marshal Montgomery's Rear Headquarters of 21st Army Group.

To say that they were thrilled is an understatement. Ever since D Day they, together with the rest of the A.T.S. who had served under 21st Army Group in England, had been in a fever of excitement. How were things going? When would they be sent for? And now they were actually picked as a small advance guard, the first British women, bar nurses, to set foot on liberated French soil!

They spent their last night in England under canvas in a transit camp started by the Army for the especial use of Servicewomen journeying to the Continent; but it is exceedingly doubtful whether they slept. It was all too incredible, from the farewell party they had just been given in the sergeants' mess to the prospect of a dawn awakening and a crossing of the Channel. Even when they had breakfasted and were being driven in two trucks to the embarkation port they kept staring back at

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the stores lorry and utility van which followed them carrying their belongings as though to reassure themselves that the whole affair was not a dream.

The port itself partly convinced them they were actually starting on their great adventure, for the inhabitants had made it their custom to speed the soldiers on their way with little gifts and when they rushed out as usual and saw Auxiliaries in the trucks, they gave them a tremendous cheer. Great platefuls of jam and treacle tart, also hot water to wash in, were provided by the mother and sister of a Naval Petty Officer, and the Auxiliaries certainly began their crossing with well-lined tummies, for just before embarkation they took their mess-tins to a mobile canteen and were served with their final ration—tea, bully beef, bread and butter and cheese.

They stepped aboard an L.S.T., their lorry and van, well waterproofed by their colleagues in some Ordnance Depot, splashed through the water after them, and as their craft had never carried women before they received a royal welcome, cabins with double bunks and hot showers being provided for them, while they were able to buy cigarettes and sweets at the canteen.

History does not relate whether any of them suffered from sea-sickness, but judging from an account of their voyage in which the sentence, "They rushed with their mess-tins to the galley the moment each meal was piped" recurs at frequent intervals, one gathers that they were remarkably good sailors. They were young, they were going on active service, they were terrifically excited—they just hadn't time to think of being sick !

Before going ashore the Captain invited them to sign all their names in a treasured book already holding the signatures of officers whom he had landed in the North African and Sicilian campaigns, in the Anzio bridgehead, and on the Normandy beaches ; and this seems to have made a deep impression upon at least one Auxiliary, since she asked for the following message to be sent to her parents:

"I'd like my family to know that I arrived safely after

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a most enjoyable journey, thanks to the Royal Navy, and at the moment I am feeling just like the Girl Guide I almost was.''

They were tired girls who saw the blasted houses and bomb craters in the flashes of the distant gun-fire as their convoy jolted over the deeply rutted roads, but they were determined not to miss *anything*, from sight of a French field to the waves of the handful of villagers attracted by the noise of the trucks, so being true members of the A.T.S. they kept themselves awake by singing their favourite songs.

Never before had Auxiliaries followed so quickly in the wake of an invading force; never before had they served so close to the front as these girls were to do. Their camp proved to be a big field next the offices in which they were to work, and when they reached it they found the Army had laid ground sheets inside the tents, lighted lamps and laid on water for them. They were also surprised to find a hot meal awaiting them in the cookhouse, for they had expected to live on a twenty-four hour ration pack. So sleepy were they that after supper they simply dumped their personal kit and rolled themselves in blankets, not bothering to unload the beds they had brought with them in their lorry.

The first day in France found them on duty in their ''offices''—really large tents in an adjoining field, and as most of them had been sent over by special request of the officers whose clerks they had been in England they received a grand welcome and soon slipped into the familiar routine of work.

For the first few days the Auxiliaries were ''confined to barracks''; that is they were not allowed out of the camp, but they found plenty to amuse themselves with, doing their unpacking, washing their ''smalls,'' burning their fingers at the Tommy cookers and making friends with the French farmers who still carried on with their jobs in the camp area. A special joy was watching the farmhands driving solemnly round at intervals to milk the cows tethered in the fields, and the girls were delighted

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to discover that Camembert and other cheeses were unrationed and obtainable in quantities because so few civilians were left in the district.

Their relatives at home had no cause for worry as to their comfort, for the soldiers had worked like beavers to turn what had been a field full of thistles some four days before the arrival of the A.T.S., into a proper "luxury" camp with two big marquees as sleeping quarters, smaller tents as officers' and sergeants' lines and Company office, and a spare one fitted up as an ironing room. Drinking water was laid on from the start and hot water provided by a stove, but very soon showers and electric lighting were installed.

II

After the advance guard the main contingent of 21st Army Group A.T.S., followed without much delay, and a great send-off they got from the people of an English port, these over four hundred officers and Auxiliaries who embarked on a troopship wearing full equipment—respirator, greatcoat, water-bottle, haversack, steel helmet, and a kitbag to carry. With Canadian soldiers, R.A.F. men and airborne troops they were allowed to go on to the top deck to wave goodbye to home, and when they transferred to an L.S.T. in order to go ashore in France they had made so many friends that the Canadians insisted upon carrying their kitbags, and the crew of the troopship gathered at the rails singing *We'll Meet Again* to the strains of an accordion.

Some of the A.T.S. clerks in this contingent were the ones who knew a particular thrill out of seeing their first prefabricated harbour, because for months they had been typing "top secret" correspondence about it.

Like their predecessors the advance guard, the Auxiliarie drove to their camp in darkness, and from time to time the soldiers who greeted their convoy as they always greet any new arrivals, were thunderstruck when women's

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voices answered them—when they recovered themselves they cheered frantically until the convoy was out of earshot.

The advance party, together with the soldiers who had made their camp with such care, provided a rousing welcome, and although the next day was officially supposed to be a holiday for the newcomers so that they might find their feet, almost all of them went along to the offices and found there so much work piling up that they got down to it straight away just as if they were still in England.

This draft of A.T.S. included seventy-three M.T. drivers belonging to a mixed car company and within a very short time these girls were driving staff cars and jeeps along the dusty roads enjoying every minute of their job.

III

The number of A.T.S. personnel in North-West Europe has grown since those first two arrivals—and is growing still. Among them are the members of the first Mixed Ack-Ack Battery serving on the Continent—and they are no strangers to active service, for the Battery was one of the earliest mixed ones to be formed in 1941 and since then it has seen long and arduous service through the blitzes, the tip and run raids and the flying bomb attacks.

Many A.T.S. officers and other ranks have served with it since its formation near Sheffield, and have travelled with it to the Humber, to Derby and Nottingham, to Lowestoft and Yarmouth and finally to Europe—not a bad record for girls who knew nothing of gunnery a few brief years ago. Still with the Battery too is Corporal Grace Golland, B.E.M., who, as has already been told in this book, was decorated by His Majesty the King for her gallantry while under fire.

A proud Battery with a proud record. It posseses its own drum and bugle band composed of twelve Auxiliaries,

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all operative numbers, and five R.A. buglers. This band has for long been a star turn in home areas where the Battery has been stationed, with the A.T.S. drum-major stalking ahead complete with leopard skin, and the drummers and buglers following in service dress with white belts and gloves and red, blue and yellow dress cords and, in the case of the Auxiliaries, side caps.

Nor is romance lacking in this tough fighting unit, for many of its girls have married gunners during the past four years, while two more of them married on their embarkation leave, one bridegroom being a sergeant in another Battery and the second a sailor in the Royal Navy.

The Battery was stationed on the East Coast when the Brigadier came round to announce it would shortly proceed overseas. None of the Auxiliaries had previously volunteered for foreign service, since the operational numbers were not permitted to do so and the clerks, cooks and orderlies could not bear the thought of leaving *their* Battery. But when the Brigadier told them they could go abroad as a complete unit eighty per cent. volunteered straight off and cheered so lustily that he could not continue his speech for several minutes ! Great was the sorrow of the remaining twenty per cent. who could not leave England for compassionate reasons. They were replaced by volunteers from other units.

For three weeks the Battery prepared for mobilisation somewhere in the Midlands, and here the Auxiliaries were inspected by Chief Controller Whateley, C.B.E., Director of the A.T.S.

A small advance party consisting of A.T.S. and Royal Artillery, and including A.T.S. officers, sergeants and cooks, flew over to the Continent to open up the camp. The remainder followed by sea.

The Ack-Ack A.T.S. took with them beds, pillows, sheets and blankets and were issued with specially warm clothing besides Service dress and two suits of battle dress. Extras included long woollen pants and woollen stockings, leather jerkins, four pair of boots and shoes, rubberised

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jackets, trousers and rubber knee boots, while the Duchess of Northumberland's Fund provided a splendid supply of woollies, among them balaclava helmets, scarves and gloves.

That the Auxiliaries in the Battery will acquit themselves as well on the Continent as they did in this country goes without saying—but I wonder personally what stupendous effect first sight of that magnificent band is going to have on the local population !

IV

Between the first Auxiliaries who served in France in 1940 with the B.E.F. and the Auxiliaries who now serve with the Liberation Army in Europe stretches a long line of girls who have gone on foreign service. The first group of A.T.S. to leave England after Dunkirk went to Washington in May, 1941, and now well over two hundred are working there. The second group left the country in December of the same year for the Middle East, where they served under the control of Controller Chitty, who remained in charge of them for over two years, and during that period the A.T.S. Middle East Force has expanded enormously. Girls are working there as clerks, cooks, M.T. drivers, storewomen, signalwomen and orderlies ; and in hospitals as radiographers, masseuses and laboratory assistants. Moreover, recruiting has been going on successfully for a long time now in Egypt and Palestine, and women living there who belong to any of the Allied countries may join, the only proviso being that each must get the permission of her own consul before enrolment. These recruits go to the Palestine Training Centre for a four weeks' basic training course and for specialised employments extra training is given. They receive lectures on Army and A.T.S. organisation, messing, clothing, pay, discipline, Military Law and hygiene among other subjects, and a highly necessary addition to

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the usual curriculum are lessons in English, as a great many women anxious to join have practically no knowledge of our language.

One A.T.S. officer in this Command is in charge of an Auxiliary M.T. Company whose achievement has been to transport thousands of casualties without one single accident or late arrival over a period of six months ; and when one considers the climatic and other difficulties under which these girls have to work one is amazed at such a record.

More A.T.S. officers are serving in North Africa and Gibraltar ; one is on the staff of the British Military Mission to the Polish Army ; and a third is Assistant Director of Labour in Eritrea.

One of the most interesting experiences of some member in the Middle East Command was when Controller Chitty was asked to provide A.T.S. personnel to do work in connection with the conference held in North Africa between the three Allied Powers, Great Britain, the United States of America and China.

Two A.T.S. Signals officers did highly secret work with telegrams, and the Controller had also to choose twenty sergeants and eighteen corporals to act as "housekeepers" to the various members of the different delegations. To begin with it was no light task to find sufficient suitable Auxiliaries who were at liberty to undertake the jobs : to end with it was rather an ordeal for those who were ultimately chosen.

A large number of villas had been taken to house the delegates, and in many cases native servants had been left in them. Now native servants can be excellent, but it was an extremely difficult thing for British girls who had hitherto had no experience of dealing with natives to ensure that the visitors had everything just as they would like it and keep the peace with the servants at the same time ! Moreover, until the A.T.S. actually walked into the houses they had not the least idea of what the job was going to be, owing to the very necessary security ban which prevented any news of the conference leaking out.

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But "the work of these girls was excellent and they were praised by all the delegates," said an administrative officer ; and the Controller herself was told by a woman friend, "Your women are earning golden opinions, everyone is saying how good they are."

Willingly and cheerfully the Auxiliaries tackled their strange task and acquitted themselves with the greatest possible degree of success. In the house allotted to Generalissimo and Mme. Chiang Kai-shek one A.T.S. sergeant acted as supervisor to the servants, while another was given a full-time job as personal attendant to Mme. Chiang Kai-shek. It is pleasant to note that the Chinese delegation were extremely friendly and grateful to these girls and thanked them most heartily when they went away.

Apart from Middle East Command there are considerable numbers of A.T.S. serving elsewhere overseas. East Africa has one contingent and North Africa another. Italy has a third contingent and Washington a fourth, while in the far Caribbean Sea Auxiliaries have been stationed on an outpost for quite a long time.

V

And the Army's need for A.T.S. to serve overseas grows ever greater. There are plenty of volunteers ; but the trouble often is that these do not belong to the particular categories required at the moment. For this reason it was recently announced in the House by the Minister for War, that it was proposed to introduce conscription for foreign service.

Immediately there was an outcry from Members of Parliament, Press and public. It was, so people averred, a dreadful thing to force young women into leaving their native land so that they might face heaven knew what perils in other countries. Such a proposal must be nipped in the bud forthwith.

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It is not for me to put forth any views on this vexed question. Perhaps it is as well though to present some facts.

Since April, 1941, when the A.T.S. was given equal military status with men, Auxiliaries enrolled for General Service and over twenty years old, are liable for service overseas. Despite this ruling no Auxiliary who is in any way unfitted either physically or mentally for such duty, or who can show genuine compassionate reasons for remaining in this country, is ever chosen for foreign service.

The great majority of Auxiliaries themselves are bewildered by the hue and cry which has arisen.

"It's queer, you know," a corporal said to me only the other day, "nobody seems to care what any other body of girls in the country does, but just let the A.T.S. start—and then the fat is in the fire."

There was a deal of truth in her pronouncement. Whenever any change has been contemplated in the organisation or administration of the A.T.S., people up and down the country suddenly develop an inordinate interest in the Auxiliary's well-being, an interest many of them unfortunately forget just as quickly so soon as the storm has died down.

From what I have seen of them—and I have seen a good deal—the Auxiliaries themselves have not the slightest objection to being called upon for foreign service. Those who have compassionate reasons for staying in England trust their officers and know there will be no question of "forcing" them to do anything which is unsuitable or unkind. Those who are free to leave the country are genuinely keen to be given the opportunity—although many of them will add the rider—"if my people will let me."

That last remark, I think, is the rub. I know perfectly well it is exceedingly hard for parents who have sons serving abroad or who perhaps have lost their sons during this war to face with equanimity the prospect of a beloved daughter also leaving them : I do feel some of

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those parents do not try to see the matter either from their daughters' or their country's viewpoint.

As for the perils supposedly surrounding the Auxiliary who ventures from these shores there is no doubt in my mind that she would be as well, if not better, looked after in North Africa, in Kenya, in Washington, in Italy, in Palestine or in North West Europe than she is in this country. The A.T.S. looks after its own most admirably, and in addition to extremely sensible unit officers who have wide experience of dealing with girls of all types, the Service also employs welfare officers whose especial job it is to ensure that Auxiliaries enjoy reasonable comfort, plenty of social activity of the right kind in their off-duty times, and infinitesimally small chances of falling into bad company while far from their homes.

But the storm will die as other storms have died. The Auxiliaries will go as other Auxiliaries have gone to help the men who have fought for them for so long.

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CHAPTER XIV

Preparing for Civvy Street

I

One of the biggest and toughest problems facing any Women's Service in wartime is how to keep its members interested in the normal civilian life they must eventually go back to, when they are leading an existence which bears not the slightest resemblance to any they have ever led before or ever will again.

At the outbreak of war the A.T.S. senior officers looked at that problem squarely and gave a great deal of thought and time to schemes for tackling it. They realised they were dealing, in their fast-growing Service, with large numbers of bright, eager young creatures who were only too anxious to throw themselves heart and soul into the business of helping to win the war. Therefore the direct approach, the "You must keep up with your reading, or your studies or your efforts to get a little more schooling because *some day* you'll need to get a job again," was of no use whatever. Being impatient and short-memoried youth would merely toss her head and say that yesterday was dead and tomorrow might never come, or if it did it wouldn't arrive for a long, long time.

No, the approach had to be indirect; but here again difficulties put out bristles. The very word "education" served to send the Auxiliaries scurrying in all directions and if an evening lecture or concert was advertised in a unit then the girls simply failed to turn up. "Why," they argued, "should we go and sit in a stuffy old hut or

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shed listening to something highbrow when we could be out dancing, or at the pictures with a boy friend ? ''

''Vocational courses'' to be taken in off-duty times were all wrong too, for the Auxiliaries had strong ideas on the liberty of the subject and resented any attempt to push them gently in the right direction.

But the officers hadn't given up hope by any means. If they could not interest the majority of the girls in their future as citizens, or in education, or yet in some sort of spare-time training they would start very slowly, very tactfully to interest them in the fitness of their own bodies.

It was an uphill job, but the scheme worked. P.T. classes rose and flourished, dancing practices of various kinds went with a swing, even hygiene classes were well attended and as the girls grew hard and wiry with good food and much outdoor living so physical fitness grew in importance.

Then the A.T.S. came under the Army Act and there began a most excellent plan of co-education for Auxiliaries and soldiers alike.

Now it is one thing if a group of young women in, say, an Ordnance Depot have to give up an hour of their free time to discuss town-planning with their Junior Commander. It is quite another if men *and* women meet together in an hour taken from duty and discuss town-planning. Instead of dreariness and people shuffling their feet and wriggling on their benches, there were fascinating arguments as to whether a young couple required two sitting-rooms or one, or whether you'd prefer a cottage in the country to a flat in a city.

''Well,'' said one Auxiliary to another after attending her first A.B.C.A. discussion group, ''I never knew those sort of things were so interesting before ! ''

''They weren't,'' remarked her companion sapiently, ''until we got the boys into it too.''

There was something in that ; there was also something in the fact that the A.B.C.A. hour gave everyone the pleasant feeling that they could sit in a warm hut instead of working outside in the cold without anybody reprimand-

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ing them for laziness; there was a third and deeper reason—the native thirst for knowledge which lurks somewhere in every human being was satisfied at last because information had been put across in an attractive and amusing way.

Gradually the suspicions of the Auxiliaries to as any "uplift nonsense" dwindled as the scope of the A.B.C.A. discussions widened. All manner of subjects came up for survey, from the progress of the war in different theatres to why you should use your local council vote at the annual elections.

Auxiliaries who had never been known to discuss anything more intellectual than the latest mode of hairdressing began to take an interest in current affairs; others who had rather fancied their superior education were astonished to find that an ex-factory hand who had left elementary school at fourteen had a far shrewder grasp of the work of local governments than they had themselves. An extremely silent girl developed a talent for public speaking, and in cookhouse and pantry, stores shed and packing department fierce arguments raged.

Of course, the first flush of enthusiasm died down, but A.B.C.A. had done a rather wonderful thing: it had stirred alive the imp of questioning in a great many Auxiliaries' minds with the result that within a few months A.B.C.A. hours had gained a solid and enduring popularity among them, much more useful than its initial success.

Thanks to A.B.C.A. the Auxiliaries began to take an intelligent interest in people and affairs outside their own immediate circle. For all too many of them life had hitherto been bound by Mum, Dad, brothers and sisters, a handful of cousins and the families living in the same street, and so narrow had these boundaries been in some cases that a girl born and brought up in one of Britain's large cities had no idea of what went on in any other part of the country at all. It was not her fault. She had probably started out with quite a sharp little brain; bnt she had gone straight from school to factory or mill, and

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[*British Official Photo.*

Bonnie lassie—Hielan' lassie.

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Welding a Churchill tank. [*British Official Photo.*

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there hadn't been any cash to spare except for the bi-weekly orgy at the movies, and the family had thought it "swank" to buy newspapers except on Sundays, and so the brain had dulled. In time the Service would have made the brain keen again, but A.B.C.A. did the job more quickly if more ruthlessly.

Nobody welcomed the A.B.C.A. periods more whole-heartedly than the A.T.S. officers. In their wisdom they knew that such a mental fillip from outside gave the girls a flying start in general adult education which they, inside the Service, could not provide. It was their job now to stimulate the mental processes A.B.C.A. had set moving. They did so in a hundred different ways, suggesting end-less ploys for barrack-room evenings, running study circles and play-readings, collecting books to form libraries, getting up concerts and theatricals.

"That's all very well," said a Company Commander in an isolated unit when I congratulated her on a concert provided entirely by the girls and rehearsed, cajoled, browbeaten and wheedled into production by herself, "we fall down on one essential thing—we can't make them *think* ! I don't see how it can be helped : they never get a chance to think. Everything is provided for them without the least conscious thought on their part ; their food, clothing, bedding, housing, pay, rail warrants, journey money. The only time they ever do think is when they sign their names on leave applications—and that's only because they want the leave."

I saw what she meant. It did seem a pity they didn't have to use a little more grey matter, but on the other hand it would be impossible to run a useful and successful Service of over 200,000 women if they were all allowed to think their own thoughts and act upon them. At the same time I had noticed signs of budding self-confidence in her concert performers and I told her so.

"That's a step on the way to thinking. And they're much more wide-awake than when I was here about seven months ago. You are too near to them all the time, you don't see the change."

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That Company Commander did not know it, but she had done her girls all the good in the world; and the more I visited A.T.S. units the more I admired her and her colleagues. They had their own exacting jobs to do, yet they spent their small leisure in devising fresh interest for their girls.

II

Things educational in the A.T.S. have marched swiftly in the past three years from their very sticky beginning to a close-knit and comprehensive policy which is now proving exceedingly satisfactory. In my opinion its success is due half to the hard work put in by the A.T.S. unit officers, and half to the officers and sergeants of the Army Education Corps who have given most valuable aid in acquiring books for study, in arranging lectures and discussion groups, and in acting as father confessors to the ambitious who are a little afraid of telling their dreams of a training in this profession or that trade.

When I was doing an Army lecture tour recently in lonely districts of Wales two A.E.C. officers and a Warrant Officer took it in turns to escort me on my visits to A.T.S. units, and I was amazed at the variety of projects for Auxiliaries these three had on hand.

At one unit the girls were anxious to learn glove-making, so up the valleys and down the valleys of Glamorgan went their particular A.E.C. officer in search of a lady he had heard of who made the real professional articles. It took him an afternoon of persuasive conversation, but finally she agreed to visit the camp one evening a week for ten weeks. He had no sooner fixed that up than requests for shorthand lessons came from another unit so an instructor was found and a course arranged.

Always when I travelled with that officer the back of the car looked like a mobile library; and indeed that is just what it was, for at each A.T.S. camp the girls would cluster round waiting for the books he had promised to loan them.

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They were almost all technical volumes, dealing with wireless, with electrical or mechanical engineering, with hotel management, with joinery and carpentry, basket-weaving, gardening—and pig-breeding. The last-named was a ponderous tome I picked up at a random from the heap, and when the officer saw my raised eyebrows he laughed.

"That's for the little sergeant at B—— Poor child, she's eating her heart out for a piggery. Apparently she wanted to become a Land Girl at the beginning of the war, but father and mother didn't think it 'quaite naice,' so she joined the A.T.S. She's gained a whole lot of confidence since then, says she's going to keep pigs after the war or bust, and keeps asking me if I think she'll be able to start with two pigs on her gratuity."

"Can she think ?" I asked absently.

"What's that ? Oh, I see. Queer isn't it how Service life develops initiative with one hand and cuts out thought with the other ? But I should imagine this girl can . . . damn, I've lost Julian Huxley's *Essays in Biology*."

"Who's that for ?"

" The mess orderly at S——. She's a good scout, but got the devil's own inferiority complex. I'm giving her a course of reading by way of cure. Y'know it's an awful job scrounging these books. People judge the A.T.S. by themselves and say, 'Oh, but she'll never return it.' Always infuriates me because I've been getting them books for over a year now and they've never let me down once."

"They wouldn't ; they're a grand crowd."

"Oh, here's Huxley ! I say, when you go to L—— tomorrow remind the Warrant Officer to take some thonging."

I scribbled "thonging" on the back of an envelope, and forgot all about it until arrival at L—, when a breathless corporal rushed up to me and said :

"Have you brought my thonging ?"

I remembered and blushed. I hadn't the foggiest idea

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what thonging was but the Warrant Officer produced a roll of what looked like leather shoelaces from his pocket.

"Here you are."

As I talked to the girls that evening I observed the uses of thonging. Six of them, including the corporal, sat in the front row making handbags and afterwards I examined them. They were beautifully made and lined with odd pieces of silk.

"Lovely leather, isn't it?" inquired the Auxiliaries "Captain D. gets it for us."

The next day I stumbled over an enormous roll of something soft done up in sacking as I stepped into the car.

"Just a few old bits of felt to make toys with. Getting near Christmas, you know."

"Have you brought them patterns too?"

"Why, yes, jolly good ones. There's a super lion."

I regretted my nastiness and felt humble. Was there anything this conscientious young man and his satellites wouldn't get the A.T.S. if they thought it would amuse or instruct the girls in these out-of-the-way camps?

One day the Warrant Officer brought his own violin to lend to a lance-corporal, another day the Lieutenant produced twelve gramophone records for an Ack-Ack Battery who had long since played their own half-dozen to shreds; and always there was something new in the back of the Captain's car which popped out like a jack-in-the-box to greet some group of excited Auxiliaries.

Between the three of them they had at least seven really useful handicraft courses running at different units, one pianoforte class, a series of lectures on modern art and an exhibition of home-made toys of which they blandished a press photographer to come and take a photograph.

Nor did their activities end there. They specialised in the giving of sound advice regarding post-war careers. If they had no reliable knowledge of a particular subject themselves they would go to no end of trouble to acquire it, and if they thought a girl was contemplating taking up

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some job for which she was unfitted they told her so frankly.

I have cited these three A.E.C. men as an example, but in the past two years I have met their like in many different parts of these islands. They are sincere, indefatigable and deservedly popular with the A.T.S.—and they know their job.

III

For my own part I have watched the Auxiliaries at lectures over a term of years now and noted the results brought about by the efforts of their own officers, by A.B.C.A. and by the A.E.C. I first talked to units early in 1942 and thought maybe they were appalled by the word "lecture" which I myself dislike intently. For a while a few of them listened and asked questions, the majority sat glumly and dumbly or indulged in fits of spurious coughing. Selfishly I did not realise on my earliest visits that a very small proportion had been in the Service for any length of time, that they were still at the bewildered, "How shall I ever stick it?" stage, or that with Russia and China I was speaking about countries which to them were more remote than the moon.

Then things began to brighten up. By the end of 1942 I was getting interest, laughter, exclamations and so many questions that we generally had to call a halt. But to me the fascinating thing is the *difference* between the December, 1942, questions and the February, 1945, questions. In 1942 I was inundated with childish inquiries: "Why don't the Russians have a king like us?"; "Why do Chinese men wear pigtails?"; "Is there a Mrs. Chiang Kai-shek?"; "Do all Russians wear beards?" Nowadays I indulge in brisk arguments on economics, sociology, education, child welfare, the attitude of Russia towards Japan, the reasons behind the Yellow River floods, the pay given to Russian women in technical jobs.

As I said earlier the best questions usually come from clerks, cooks and orderlies. They want to know how

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other people live, while the highly technical A.T.S. tradeswoman has a narrower viewpoint and is only interested in what women of her type are doing elsewhere.

The A.T.S. officers have done right away with the "lecture" idea. The girls are encouraged to bring their knitting or sewing, to smoke, to lounge back as comfortably as they like while a talk is in progress—and talks are given on barrack evenings when the Auxiliaries do not go out anyway, so none of their actual free time has to be given up. All these improvements are excellent, but it is the work behind the real awakening of the girls that is the great thing, and that has been brought about chiefly by their Education and unit officers.

IV

At the present moment the A.T.S. Education Officers under their Senior Officer in London are still busy working out more and more trainings which Auxiliaries may take under the Army scheme to fit them for jobs in the post-war world. Many of these are already in operation and courses connected with music and art seem exceptionally popular. The officers, however, are rightly insisting that the girls should remember that a living will have to be earned and although at this stage of affairs there is no longer any resentment at mention of this subject—for the Auxiliaries realise that far-away Civvy Street is looming closer on their horizon—there is still a disinclination to think clearly and coolly about what they want to do.

After two or three or five years of Service life it certainly must be desperately hard for girls who were little more than children when they joined up to visualise a world in which there are no officers to take troubles to, no Army beds, no three square meals a day—no anything unless they go out and seek it. They have lived hard in the Service and suffered discomfort and sometimes

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extreme danger as in Ack-Ack, but they have been looked after and the Army has acted as buffer between them and the outside world.

From this buffer idea has grown another, a natural but entirely wrong illusion: that if they enter for one of these pre-demobilisation courses for training in a profession or trade the Army will automatically pop them into nice safe post-war jobs.

If I were an Auxiliary I think I might easily suffer the same illusion, simply because I should be so used to the Army guiding my career; but for the A.T.S. Education Officers this idea is a constant worry.

"We've told them time and again," said a Senior Commander, "that while we'll do absolutely everything we can to help afterwards—references, suggestions, introductions and so on—we simply cannot *get* them jobs."

And still some of her girls cherish the belief that Authority will provide!

In consequence it is rather difficult sometimes to persuade girls to take the *right* pre-demobilisation course of training. Take for example a girl who was a shorthand-typist before the war. Vaguely she supposes she'll get a job of the same sort after the war, but the Education officer has hard work to make her see that if she would take the course in commercial French and German she would greatly enhance her value to some future employer.

Study of the list of the courses in progress or being arranged shows the tremendous amount the Authorities are doing for Service members. Every kind of work, from University examinations to cooking, is catered for and the Auxiliaries thus have a wonderful opportunity to get free tuition while still in the Service.

Many of them have taken advantage of this; but there are many who still hesitate, perhaps because it means they must give up their free time on several evenings a week. Later on it is hoped to have the courses in working hours, but the state of Europe must be tidied up before that can happen.

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IV

As I have said previously the bulk of the A.T.S. long for a home, a place of their own ; so the courses in "home-making" are exceedingly popular. I had imagined these would be sensible and fairly comprehensive trainings, including house management and cleaning, cookery, food values and perhaps dressmaking. I reckoned without the A.T.S. Education Officers !

These women know perfectly well that in the ordinary small home domestic matters never move on oiled wheels. There is always a minor crisis of some description, and the girl who has learnt domestic science at a school often finds it enormously hard to cope with a house which simply does not possess gadgets of all sorts, a house where the coal does not arrive, or the pipes burst, or unexpected guests occur.

So one part of the home-making course fascinated me. On entering each pupil was given a slip of paper. This was her "assignment" for that lesson. I quote two of these "assignments."

1. You live in a cottage in the country a good way from a town. Butcher and baker call only twice a week —and this is *not* one of their days. In your cupboard you have (there follows a list), and in your garden are (a list of vegetables). It is ten o'clock in the morning and you get a telegram saying that two rather important visitors are coming to spend the day with you. You can't put them off and you have two hours in which to prepare for them. What are you going to give them to eat ? "

The second "assignment" :

2. It is a Friday and your small son has just come back from a holiday and all his clothes need washing and mending. Your husband telephones to say that his mother is ill and that you must all go to his home, a considerable distance away by train, for the week-end.

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He wants you to pack his bag. You and the boy are to meet him in about five hours' time at a certain station. Which of your child's clothes are you going to wash? How will you dry, iron and air them in the time available?

Now to my mind these two assignments are first-class. They present just the sort of crisis which occurs in the small home, just the kind of thing these Auxiliaries will have to face when they have homes of their own.

To make the thing complete each "assignee" finds the things she requires laid out for her—including the small boy's dirty clothes! And during her lesson she actually has to *do* the best she can with them.

The "assignments" are tremendously popular with the girls, and it adds to their interest, for they never know until they walk into the classroom what difficulties they will have to surmount.

Cookery classes are also in much demand, and here again the cookery taught is of the "make-do" variety. Great attention is paid to the way in which simple dishes are presented, also to the care which should always be taken in the buying of foodstuffs. Some girls who are A.T.S. cooks finds difficulty at first in handling such small quantities. If you have been accustomed for several years to catering for big numbers you are apt to throw in ingredients in a large way! But in these classes the girls definitely learn how to cater for one to six people.

"And once you get the lesser quantities fixed in your head," a cook told me, "then it's marvellous how quickly you find yourself able to adapt dishes you've learnt in the Service."

"I find cakes and buns difficult," said a second. "I can make a batch of a hundred buns and they'll turn out splendidly; but I'm bothered if I can make a similar batch of a dozen! The wretched things just don't rise."

Invalid cookery is also taught with a view to possible hospital jobs, while it is emphasised that the average A.T.S. cook would find a restaurant or institution job interesting and suitable. To this end she may attend a

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refresher course on nutrition values, butchery and so forth.

"In London," said the Senior Commander, "it is very difficult to get the girls to attend courses—a pity, because we have so many facilities which cannot be found elsewhere. The truth is there is too much going on outside and the girls naturally wish to go to concerts or theatres or cinemas in their spare time. We find that the girls in lonely districts are the ones who most appreciate this pre-demobilisation training."

It must be remembered that the whole business of pre-demobilisation training is still in its infancy. The Auxiliaries are still much too busy with their immense variety of Army jobs to give time or thought to other work. The important thing is that the scheme is there, ready to the last hair, and the moment circumstances permit it will be put into full operation.

V

Some people may think I have put A.T.S. Education in rather a sombre light. Certainly I have tried to present the innumerable difficulties under which any educational plans must labour in a Women's Service, but I have also tried to show the great strides which have been made in the past three years and the growing appreciation of the girls for some kind of post-war training.

It is no light job to find out what over 200,000 young women want to do and to provide them with the means of doing it—especially when a short hour or two a week is all the time available.

Personally I hold the most sincere admiration for the way in which the A.T.S. has tackled this problem. I like especially the officers' frank admission that their girls will find many things which are awkward when they return to civilian life, that they will experience difficulty in re-

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acclimatising themselves. I like even more the way in which the officers have thrown themselves into the preparation of different schemes. If an A.T.S. girl starts civilian life without an adequate training in the background it will certainly not be the fault of the Service.

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ENVOI

I

THERE are so many categories I have not mentioned, so many remarks from Auxiliaries I have not put into this book. I have not, for example, mentioned the A.T.S. "Redcaps," those girls whose first public appearance caused both protest and ridicule, yet whose real job is a most necessary one. You cannot expect 200,000-odd girls all from different walks of life and different sorts of homes to behave perfectly all the time, and it is thanks to the "Redcaps" in great measure that those who do misbehave are caught before they go too far.

I have not mentioned the shoe-repairers, or the hospital orderlies, or many other groups of Auxiliaries who are doing excellent work both here and overseas. I have forgotten also to write about a group of A.T.S. officers and N.C.O.'s who receive small recognition outside the Service, but who are deserving of highest praise because for the past five—and in some cases six—years these women have been at the gruelling job of training their fellow-women. They have trained the girls in the basic training camps, they have trained N.C.O.'s on a variety of courses for specialised work, they have trained the budding officers in the O.C.T.U.'s. Training, training . . . *and* training. Giving the same lectures week in and week out to the changing groups, answering the same questions, checking the same examination papers. To my mind their work seems so monotonous as to be well-nigh unendurable, but although many of these training officers

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have often ached for a posting to a more exciting branch of the Service I have never yet met one who has allowed herself to get stale or bored.

And I have not written this book as a chronological survey of the Auxiliary Territorial Service. I have tried merely to give a series of pictures and descriptions of what the Service has done since the outbreak of war.

Their contribution to the Army has been colossal—that is a big word I know, but it is the only right one. Who would have imagined six years ago that women would be working in Ordnance Depots, driving three-ton trucks year in and year out, manning Signal Stations, cleaning ammunition, sealing tanks, mending wireless sets and telephones, working kine-theodolites, manning Ack-Ack guns? Yet the Auxiliaries have done all these things and more, done them superbly well through blizzards and blitzes, through discomforts and dangers. What's more, they're still doing them and they won't let up until the Japanese war is over.

They haven't had an easy time. Perhaps the public does not realise how much the Auxiliaries feel when, owing to the action of one of their problem children, the whole Service is discredited; but the girls do feel such things very deeply indeed for they are rightly proud of their record.

II

Time and again in my wanderings among the A.T.S. I have been struck by their capacity for hard work, tough work, any sort of work which presented difficulties. You need only to meet their Director to understand where that capacity comes from, for she works harder than any man or woman I have ever met. She has tradition behind her—she is the granddaughter of a Field-Marshal who rose to that rank from a midshipman in the Navy; she is completely feminine; she is exceedingly tolerant—and she works.

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Her example is reflected throughout the Service she leads. You will find it in her Senior officers and you will find it in the smallest A.T.S. private. Give an Auxiliary an impossible job and she will set upon it like a terrier worrying a bone. What is more she won't leave it alone until she has done her utmost to conquer it.

The A.T.S., however, are remarkably modest about their achievements. "We're not soldiers," one of them told me, "we don't pretend to be—*but we're awfully good stooges.*"

That is how some of them like to be known, "the stooges" of the British Army.

I have seen Auxiliaries working in all weathers and a variety of costumes and I used to think I liked them best in their oily dungarees and kerchiefs round their heads, crawling under tanks and lorries. I've changed my mind, for I keep remembering a "Salute the Soldier" week parade I attended in a North of England city.

The huge crowds cheered different Naval, Army and R.A.F. detachments, swayed to and fro in excitement, made the praiseful or derisive comments of the usual English crowd. Then from the distance came the shrill sound of the bugles, backed by the beat of the drums and a band of the A.T.S. came into view, marching slowly through a wide square. They marched superbly. Ahead of them was their drum-major, a tall slim girl with the leopard skin spread bravely across her and her arms swinging, twirling, swinging as she beat the drum. Against the khaki of uniform buttons shone with a dazzling sheen, dress cords made zig-zags of brilliant colour. The band looked neither to right nor left but blew on their bugles as though their lives depended on the volume of sound they could issue. The crowd went mad—I have never seen an English crowd so moved by anything, and I got a lump in my throat. They might call themselves "stooges": I knew better. They were Britain's other Army.

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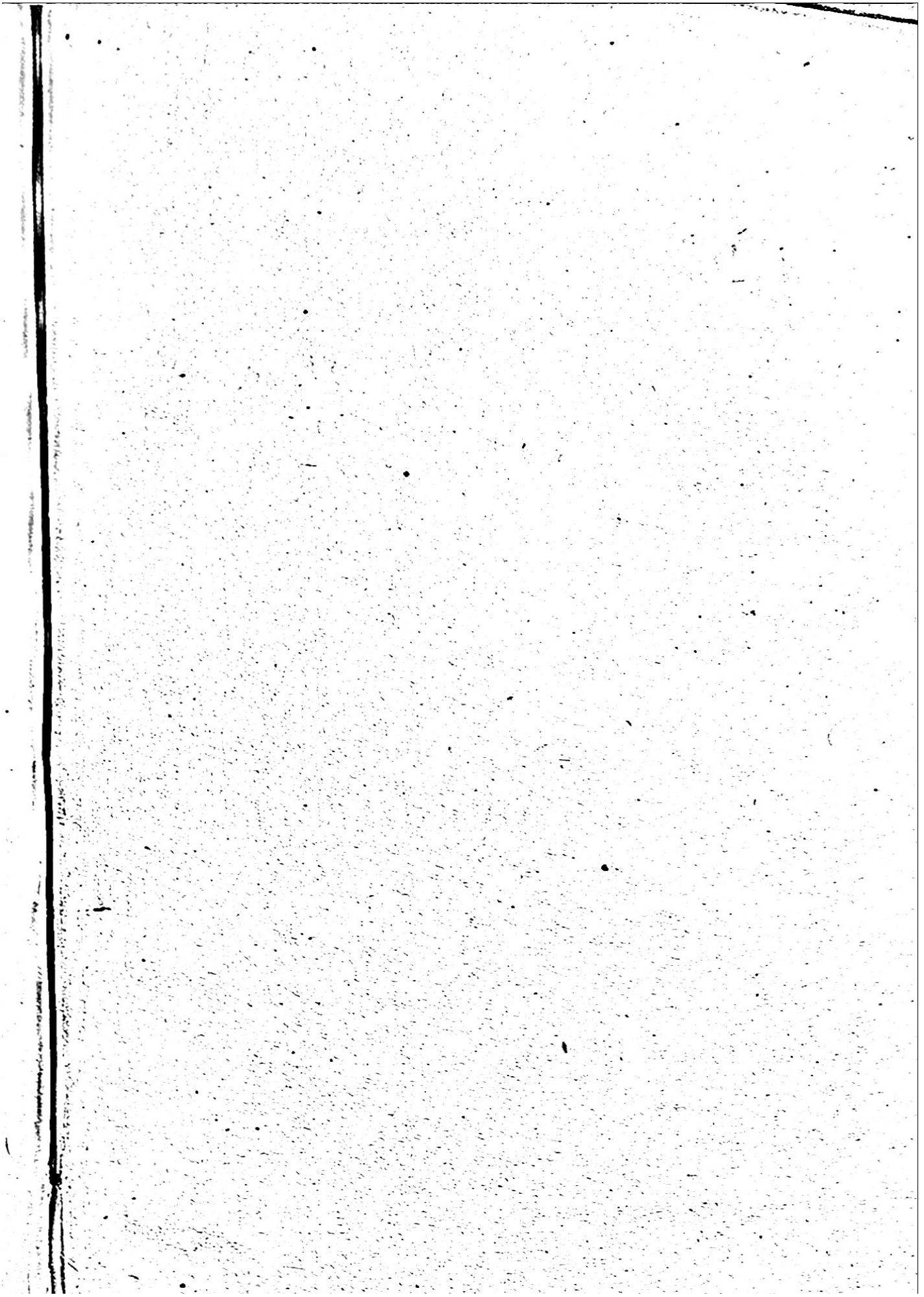

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